BACK FROM AFRICA

FROM THE AUTHOR OF THE FOUR-MILLION COPY BESTSELLER

CORINNE HOFMANN

'A startling experience [with] riveting exotica and intriguing human relationships'
The Hollywood Reporter on *The White Masai*

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Annotation

In The White Masai Corinne Hofmann told the incredible story of how she fell in love with and married Lketinga, a Masai warrior, and lived with his family in Kenya. Now, in Back From Africa, she describes her return to Switzerland and the difficulties that faced her there, detailing how she built a new life for herself and her daughter and overcame all obstacles with the same courage and optimist with which she faced the demands of her life in the Kenyan outback. Once again, Hofmann has proved herself to be an acute observer and an effective storyteller, and her astonishing and compelling tale speaks for herself.

- Corinne Hofmann
  - Foreword
  - Back in the ‘Big White World’
  - Getting Used to Our New Lives
  - Back On My Own Two Feet
  - The Bureaucratic Hurdles
  - Divorce from Lketinga
  - Memories Come Flooding Back
  - I Decide to Write My Story
  - You Can Learn Anything if You Try
  - Publishing Sensation
  - New Love
  - Plans for the Future
  - Off to Kilimanjaro
  - Longing for Africa
  - Acknowledgments
- notes
  - 1
  - 2

Corinne Hofmann
Back from Africa

Foreword

When my book *The White Masai* first appeared in 1998 I was optimistic that the story of my African love affair would find a wide readership. But I would never in my wildest dreams have dared hope that before long it would be on the international bestseller lists, translated into eighteen languages and made into a film. The book's success and everything that went with it became a huge adventure in its own right.

At that time I had not the slightest intention of writing another book. But over the years I have had so many letters, faxes and emails from readers telling me how touched they have been by my story in different ways. Almost every one of them has finished by asking me how my daughter and I, and my African family are doing today.

In the early days I tried to answer each of them individually, but eventually there were so many I had to give up. Each new expression of interest in our fate however, has made me feel almost obliged to do something in response.

It is therefore to all those whose interest in my life story has moved me so much that I would like to dedicate this book.

Lugano, April 2003

Back in the 'Big White World'

I hear the voice faintly, like someone calling from far, far away: 'Hello… hello… time to wake up!' All of a sudden I feel a hand on my shoulder. I open my eyes and for a moment I haven't the faintest idea where I am. It's only when I catch sight of the travel cot next to my feet and my daughter Napirai lying in it that it all comes rushing back. I'm in an aeroplane. The woman takes her hand from my shoulder and says with a smile: 'Your baby and you have been sound asleep. We'll be landing in Zurich shortly and you've missed all the in-flight meals.'

I can hardly believe it. We've done it. We've got out of Kenya. My daughter and I are free.

Immediately my mind darts back to the tension of our last moments in Nairobi at passport control: the official looking at us and asking, 'Is this your child?' Napirai is asleep, wrapped up in a *kanga* cloth on my back. 'Yes,' I say. He leafs through her child's identity card and my passport. 'Why are you leaving the country with your daughter?' he asks next. 'I want to show my mother her grand-daughter.' 'Why isn't your husband with you?' He has to work to earn money, I tell him trying to act as nonchalant as possible.

The man gives me a stern look and says he wants a better look at the baby's face. He wants me to wake her up and call her by her name. I'm getting more nervous now. Napirai, just over fifteen months old now, wakes up and looks around sleepily. The man keeps asking her her name. Napirai doesn't answer him; instead the corners of her mouth start drooping and all of a sudden she starts crying. I try to calm her down as best I can, worried that everything's going to go wrong at the last moment and we're not going to be able to leave the country. The man turns Napirai's German child's ID card in his hand and asks in a stern voice: 'Why does a child with a Kenyan father have a German passport? Is this really your daughter?' The questions keep coming until I'm dripping with sweat. I try to tell him as calmly as possible that my husband is a traditional Masai who doesn't have a passport and this was the only one we could get for my daughter at short notice. I tell him we'll be back in three weeks and will try to get a Kenyan passport then.

At the same time I push the letter signed by my husband at him and pray silently to myself: 'Dear Lord God please don't desert us now, let us just manage these few meters out on to the plane!' Behind us crowds of tourists are jostling in annoyance, wanting to know what's going on. The man gives me another penetrating stare and then his white teeth flash into a big broad grin: 'OK, have a nice journey and see you in three weeks time. Bring back something nice for your

husband.'

* * *

All this is still running through my mind as I pick up my little daughter and, still exhausted, put her to my breast to feed. Now, just before landing, my emotions are mixed. What is my mother going to say? Will she and her husband bother to turn up at the airport to meet us? And if they do, then what? How do I tell her that this isn't a holiday but that I've run away from the former love of my life and have neither the courage nor the strength to go back? I don't know where to start.

Shaking my head, trying to shut out these thoughts, I start getting our stuff together. But as the aircraft lands once again I'm overcome by a wave of relief: I've got my daughter out of Kenya. We've done it!

I stroll through the airport terminal with Napirai on my back, feeling a bit out of place in my simple patched skirt, short-sleeved T-shirt and sandals on a cool 6 October 1990. I get the impression people are giving me funny looks.

Finally I catch sight of my mother and her husband. I run up to her happily but notice straight away that she's taken aback to see how skinny I am. I'm little more than skin and bones and weigh barely fifty kilos for my one-meter-eighty height. I have to struggle to keep back the tears and suddenly feel unbearably tired and exhausted. My mother is clearly moved and takes me in her arms, her own eyes damp with tears. Hanspeter, her husband, greets us warmly but with a hint of reserve; we don't really know each other very well.

We set off for home. They have moved from the Bernese Oberland down to Wetzikon near Zurich. We're no sooner in the car than my mother's asking after Lketinga and wanting to know how long we're staying here on holiday. I feel a lump in my throat and can't bring myself to tell her the truth. Instead I say simply, 'Three to four weeks maybe.'

I make up my mind to tell her the whole tragic tale later. My mother hasn't the faintest idea how bad a time I've had because I wasn't able to write to tell her what had been going on over the last few months. My husband watched my every move and insisted on me translating each and every sentence I wrote. When we moved down to the coast he would take my letters to other people who could read some German and ask them to translate them. Unless he agreed with the letter's contents, he forced me to burn it. Even when I thought a little about things back home he would look at me suspiciously as if he could read my mind: '*Why you thinking at Switzerland, you stay here*

in Kenya and you are my wife.' Then again, I hadn't wanted to worry my mother unnecessarily, given that at the time I was still planning on us staying together in Kenya.

When we get home we're greeted by the loud barking of a dog which scares Napirai. In Kenya people and dogs keep their distance. This animal is barking like a lunatic and baring its teeth.

'He's not used to strangers and not to children at all, but it'll be OK for a few days anyway,' my mother explains. Once again I feel embarrassed and awkward knowing that we'll have to live here until everything gets sorted out. And that could take some time as I no longer have a residence permit for Switzerland and have only entered the country as a tourist. I may have been born and brought up in Switzerland but like my father, I have a German passport. After living abroad for more than six months I've lost my right to residency in Switzerland. I don't even want to think about all the stuff we're going to have to deal with.

God help me, I really have to tell my mother! But right now I simply haven't the strength to shatter her happiness and tell her the real reason we're here. She's just so happy to see her daughter and grand-daughter again. Apart from anything else they simply aren't prepared for her grown-up daughter and a child moving in. I haven't lived at home with my mother since I was eighteen.

Napirai and I move into the little guest room and unpack our few worldly belongings. All we have is a few bits of children's clothing, about twenty terry nappies and a pair of jeans and jumper for me. I left everything else in Kenya — Lketinga had to believe I was coming back. Otherwise he would never have let me leave with our daughter.

I have to move carefully around this beautiful big house with all its fine furniture, plants and carpets. What impresses me most however is the toilet which I now get to use instead of a stinking earth closet. My mother asks me what I'd like to eat. My mouth waters at the thought of a juicy sausage and cheese salad and I tell her as much. She's almost disappointed because she wanted to cook something special for me. But as far as I'm concerned, this simple meal is the best thing I can imagine after four years living in the bush. Living amidst the Samburu, I never got the chance to eat anything fresh. We had nothing but maize meal or occasionally rice or on even fewer occasions, basic meat with no seasoning. I'm really looking forward to a salad with some fresh bread!

Meanwhile Napirai has got used to her surroundings and become curious watching these unknown white people. She's pulled all the books off the bookshelf and is digging around in the plant pots. These are all new things for her.

At long last food is ready. I could almost cry just looking at it.

When I think how often I dreamed of a meal like this! Now I can just ask for it and half an hour later there it is!

Of course, my mother wants to hear everything about my new life in Mombasa and how my souvenir shop on Diani Beach is doing. She's so happy that after three years out in the deepest bush I've moved back again to something closer to civilization. The one thing she doesn't understand is why I'm even thinner than last time I came home as it's easier now for me to get food. I can't cope with these questions which make me all the more sad, so I just give her robotic answers, all far from the truth. Her almost naive lack of worry makes it all the harder to tell her the truth.

My delight in my delicious meal doesn't last. After half an hour I'm lying curled up on the bed suffering from an attack of stomach cramp. After being treated for hepatitis barely six months ago I obviously shouldn't have eaten any fat and certainly not anything straight from the fridge. For years now all I've had to eat has been the most basic meal from a stew pot. But given the opportunity to have something special again I simply didn't think. All I can do to calm my stomach down is to make myself throw up.

My mother is giving Napirai a bath which she likes a lot, splashing and squeaking with delight. Afterwards she has a Pampers disposable nappy put on her for the first time. God, how easy that makes things! Put it on, she fills it up, take it off and throw it away. Absolutely magnificent! Goodbye to the days back in Nairobi when I had to carry dirty nappies around and then wash them each evening in cold water until my knuckles were raw.

By eight in the evening I'm exhausted. In Kenya we usually went to bed around this time as we didn't have electric light and it got dark early. In any case I have to take Napirai to bed as she isn't used to sleeping on her own. In the *manyatta* up in the Kenyan highlands she would either sleep with me or her grandmother and when we were down on the coast she would sleep between my husband and me. That's normal for Samburu children. They need bodily contact. Once we're in bed, I'm overcome by feelings of sadness and doubt, wondering if I'm doing the right thing. I fall asleep sobbing softly to myself.

The next morning we face a big question: what to put on? It's October and for us, just flown in from the heat of Kenya, it's extremely cold. Napirai has never taken to clothes at all and now she has to put on a pullover and jacket my mother has bought. She's not at all happy wrapped up in all this clothing and keeps trying to take it off. But we can't have that. For a start it's cold, and secondly, everybody in Switzerland wears clothes.

The dog is another problem: he doesn't seem to like us. He

growls, barks and bares his teeth when he sees us. Napirai, however, has got used to him and wants to play with him all the time. She's a little Masai girl and doesn't know the meaning of fear. As for me, on the other hand, I'm half-hysterical with worry that he'll bite her. I might see him as dangerous, but as far as my mother and Hanspeter are concerned he's just the sweetest pet, a sort of child substitute.

* * *

For the first two or three days I'm just tired and exhausted. I keep thinking about Lketinga and how he's getting on in the shop on his own. Obviously he's still got William to help but they don't really get on, not since William was caught stealing money from us.

Over the next few days I go for walks to take my mind off things, passing by the agricultural college nearby and spending hours looking at the cows. Somehow that calms me down and gives me a sort of inner peace that makes me feel at one with my mother-in-law, whom I used to call 'Gogo'. How is she going to react when she realises she isn't going to see Napirai again? According to Samburu tradition my daughter actually ought to be given to her. All these sorts of thoughts keep going round and round in my head.

When my mother and Hanspeter sit down to watch the TV news in the evening I tend to take Napirai and retreat into our little room. All the terrible pictures of the Gulf War and the misery in the world are too much for me and I can't bear to look. For the past four years I've had no contact with television or almost any other media. I was living in the world of a thousand years ago and now I feel completely overwhelmed by all the news and pictures. Only once do I find myself completely glued to the screen. It's a report about the fall of the Berlin Wall in Germany. I can hardly believe my eyes. I genuinely had no idea what had happened even though it's more than a year ago now. I really can't come to terms with it. The Wall was always something we lived with at home because my grandparents on my father's side had lived in the East.

I had known since I was a little child how different the two Germany's were, because my father was always full of stories when he came back from a visit to East Germany. And now they were reunited! The whole world knew it but the news never reached us out in the bush. I find tears running down my cheeks looking at the pictures. My mother and her husband understandably find my reaction funny. But then even movies seem different to me now. Or is it just me that's changed?

Whatever it is, I'm stunned by all the nudity and love scenes in

modern films. In Kenya people don't kiss in public or even hold hands; in fact the Samburu don't kiss at all. I gradually realise that over the past four years I've turned into a prude.

After a few days my mother says I really ought to buy some new clothes. So I head out for the shops leaving her to look after Napirai. But all these shops jammed full of clothes and other goods make me nervous. I don't know what suits me any more and so I buy leggings, which seem to be fashionable, and a jumper. It seems incredibly expensive. For the same amount of money back in Kenya I could have bought at least three or four goats or a magnificent cow.

Back home I show my mother what I've bought only for her to exclaim in horror that there's no way I can go out in public in those leggings. I'm far too thin and would look like an invalid. That finishes off my newly-won pride in my pretty new clothes and I feel really ugly. I also realise with a shock that I've become terribly sensitive in this 'white' world. Things were different back in my world in Kenya among the Africans. Back there I had to do everything on my own and organise everything. It is becoming ever more clear to me how much I've changed over the past few years. Here in Europe time rushes by and there are so many things that are new and strange to me. In Africa everything has its own pace and days seem vastly longer than they are here. What has happened to the self-confident businesswoman I used to be? I've become emaciated, homeless, with a small child and not even the courage to tell my own mother the truth.

A week later, fate makes the decision for me. We're having dinner when the phone rings. My mother picks it up and says, 'Hello, hello,' several times before hanging up. She says it sounded like a long-distance call but there was nobody on the other end. I'm staring at her with sweaty palms, not wanting to believe what I'm hearing. She just laughs and says, 'don't look so shocked! It's almost certainly just your husband ringing up for a chat. You ought to be pleased!'

I was nearly sick with nerves and worry. Obviously I'd left my mother's telephone number. Sophia, my Italian friend, had asked me to. If Lketinga ran into problems with the shop she was going to call me, as he'd never used a phone in his life. But I hadn't told her either that I wasn't coming back. I hadn't trusted anybody with my real plans for fear things would go wrong. And now this happens! I'm sitting there staring transfixed at the telephone, but for now at least it remains silent. My mother tries to tell me there's nothing wrong and I should get on with my meal. But I've lost my appetite. My brain is whirring trying to work out how I should act on the phone. And then it rings again. My mother tells me cheerfully I should go and answer it. But I can't move. I just stare in panic at her as she lifts the receiver. She gives a cheerful '*Yes*' in English and calls me over. I walk to the

phone mechanically and hold the receiver to my ear, immediately recognizing Sophia's voice.

'Hallo Corinne, how are you, I'm here together with your husband Lketinga. He's desperate to know how his wife and child are and when you'll be coming back to Kenya. Shall I put him on?'

'No, *wait,'* I shout into the phone. 'I need to talk to you first. Sophia, what I'm about to tell you is bad news, for Lketinga, you, me, everybody. We're not coming back. I can't stand my husband's jealousy any longer. You've seen a bit of what it's like yourself. I couldn't tell you before or we wouldn't have got out of the country.' Behind my back I can hear the sound of cutlery falling on to the floor. 'Please, Sophia, please, try to explain to Lketinga. I'll do everything I can from here to help him with the shop and the car. He can have it all, all the money there, everything except our daughter Napirai. I'm going to try to make a new life for myself and her.'

I can sense how shocked Sophia is. She asks me if I'm sure I don't want to talk to my husband; the money for the call is running out fast. I take down the telephone number and tell her I'll call back in ten minutes to talk to Lketinga. I put the receiver down, feeling totally drained, and turn to see my mother and Hanspeter staring at me. And at that moment the tears fill my eyes and I start sobbing uncontrollably. I sit there for what seems like ages, next to the telephone, feeling as miserable as sin and at the same time somewhat relieved that my mother and Lketinga both now know.

I hear my mother asking me, in a quavering voice: 'How did all this come about then? I thought that apart from a few minor things you two were happy. You'd bought such a nice shop with the rest of your money. And you know you haven't even got a Swiss residence permit any more!' There are tears in her eyes now too. Her words are like daggers. I remember that all I wanted was to create a happy family with the love of my life and never to take my daughter away from her father. She is, after all, the child born of our overwhelming love. But I simply don't have the strength any more and know I have to decide in favor of life rather than death. Napirai isn't even two years old yet; she needs me. I've got through so much, from malaria in pregnancy to giving birth in a hospital out in the bush not to mention the isolation ward we had to live in because of highly infectious hepatitis. No, there's no way I'm letting go of my little girl. I want to live for her. I don't want her to undergo 'female circumcision' before she gets married. No, I'm not going to submit her to that, even if the price we have to pay is growing up in the white world without her father.

'Is it OK if I call them back, in Kenya? Lketinga will be distraught,' I ask my mother rather than answering her question which

I couldn't do anyway right now. I have to dial the number three times before I get through. First I hear some unknown African voice and then Sophia, then almost immediately Lketinga: ‘Hallo my wife, why you not come back to me? I'm your husband! I really love you and my baby. I cannot stay without you and Napirai. I don't want another wife. You are my wife.’

In tears, I tell him his crazy uncontrollable and unjustified jealousy hurt me too many times. ‘I've felt like a prisoner lately. I can't and won't live like that. And when you threw at me the idea that Napirai might not even be your daughter, that finally finished off my love for you and any hope I had, Lketinga. I just can't take it any more. I'll do all I can to help you. I'll write to James and get him to come and help you. I'll try to explain everything properly in a letter. I'm so very sorry.’

But he doesn't understand any of this and just answers me half-laughingly but unsure of himself: ‘I don't know what you tell me. My wife, I wait for you and my child. I'm sure you will come back to me.’ Then there's a crack on the line and it goes dead.

I feel like I've been hit over the head. I go over to my little Napirai, lift her up off her baby chair and like a woman sleepwalking take her off to our room. I can't think straight any more today. My mother and Hanspeter seem to understand and say nothing. Napirai always knows when I'm not feeling well and gets particularly clingy. She sucks hard at my breast, kneading it with her hand.

When she falls asleep. I start writing my letters.

> Dear Lketinga,
>
> I hope you can forgive me for what I have to tell you. I am not coming back to Kenya. I've been thinking a lot about us. More than three and a half years ago I was so in love with you that I was prepared to live in Barsaloi with you. I also gave you a daughter. But ever since the day you alleged she was not your daughter, I haven't been able to feel the same as I used to about you any more. You noticed this too.
>
> I never wanted anybody else and never lied to you. But in all the years we were together you never understood me, maybe just because I am a *mzungu*[1]. My world and yours are very different but I had imagined one day we could inhabit the same one.
>
> Now however, after our last chance together in Mombasa I realise that you aren't happy and I am certainly not either. We're still young and can't go on living like this. Right now you won't understand what I mean but after a time you'll see that you'll be happy again with someone else.

It will be easy for you to find another woman who lives in the same world as you. But this time, find yourself a Samburu woman not a white woman.

We're too different. One day you'll have lots of children.

I've taken Napirai with me because she's all that I have left. Also, I know I'll never have another child, and without Napirai I couldn't survive. She is my life! Please, please Lketinga, forgive me. I simply don't have the strength to live in Kenya any more. I was always on my own there without a friend and you treated me like a criminal. You didn't notice, but that's just Africa. I tell you once again I never did anything wrong by you.

It is up to you now to decide what you want to do about the shop. I'm writing to Sophia too. I'm sure she will help you. I'm handing the whole business over to you, but if you want to sell it, you'll have to deal with Anil, the Indian.

I will do what I can to help you from here and won't let you down. If you have problems, tell Sophia. The rent for the shop is paid until the middle of December but if you don't want to work any more you really have to talk to Anil. I'm also giving you the car, and including the necessary papers with this letter. If you want to sell the car, you should get at least 80,000 Kenyan shillings. But make sure you find someone reliable to help you sell it. When you have, you'll be a rich man.

And please, Lketinga, don't be unhappy. You'll find a better wife. You're young and handsome. Napirai will always remind me of the good things about you. Please try to understand me! I would have died in Kenya and I don't believe that's what you would have wanted. My family think nothing bad about you, they still like you, but we're just too different.

Best wishes from Corinne and family

Hi Sophia,

I've just come off the phone from talking to Lketinga and you. I'm feeling really unhappy and can't stop crying. I've just told you I'm not coming back and it's the truth. I knew that before I'd even got home to Switzerland. You know something of what my husband's like. I loved him more than I'd ever loved anybody in my whole life. I was ready to lead a proper Samburu life for his sake. I was ill so often when we lived in Barsaloi but I stayed because I loved him. But a lot has changed since Napirai was born.

One day he even alleged she wasn't his child. Ever since then I've lost my love for him. Our days together swung between highs and lows and a lot of the time he treated me badly.

Sophia I swear to you by all that's holy I never went with another man, never! But I had to listen to allegations from him from morning to night. Mombasa was our one last chance to get things right together. But I can't go on living like that. He doesn't even notice. I've given up everything for him, even my native country. Of course I've changed too but I think that's not unusual under the circumstances. I feel really sorry for him, but for myself too. I don't even know where I'm going to be able to live from now on.

But Lketinga is my biggest problem. He doesn't have anyone to run the shop and he can't do it. I would be delighted if he managed to make-it work, but if he doesn't he should just sell it all off. The same goes for the car. Napirai is staying with me. I know she'll be happier.

Please, Sophia, do what you can for Lketinga, he's going to have so many problems now. Unfortunately there's not much I can do for him. If I ever came back to Kenya he wouldn't let me leave to come back to Switzerland.

I hope his brother James will come down to Mombasa. I'm going to write to him. Please help him deal with people. I know you have problems of your own and I hope they'll all work out for the best soon. I hope everything goes well for you and hope you find another white woman friend.

All the very best and lots of love,

Corinne

I also write to James, Lketinga's younger brother, who's the only one of the family that's been to school and did such a lot to help us. Then I write to Father Giuliani in Barsaloi to give him the sad news.

* * *

The next morning my mother has deep rings around her eyes. We waste no time in sitting down at the table so I can at last tell her the truth about my life in Africa. Now that I'm sitting here in Switzerland I leave nothing out. I describe my life among Lketinga's tribe in detail, from both sides, good and bad, and remind her that in the early days I had imagined spending the rest of my life among the Samburu.

‘But after we opened the food store they needed so badly, his

jealousy just got worse and worse and made everything all the more difficult. I wasn't allowed to go and talk to the missionary any more and I certainly couldn't have a conversation with his little brother James or any of the other boys. And I'd always looked forward so much to talking to them during the school holidays. Lketinga had caused so many problems that one of the boys even had to leave the village before he did something dreadful.

'Then with me being sick all the time the shop wasn't being run well and so a few months ago we'd decided to move to the coast. I'd really hoped we could start again there and that's why I asked Marc to bring me out all the money we needed to set up the souvenir shop. I had even hoped he would exert a good influence on Lketinga, talking to him as an "elder", and indeed it worked for a while. Lketinga got back to normal and was even rather sweet and attentive for a bit. He even helped a bit in setting up the shop and looked forward to the work.

'But then, later, when I would start talking to the tourists or even laughing with them, all hell would break loose. He would ask me in front of tourists how come I knew this person when I absolutely didn't. I kept trying to convince him that I still loved him and had done all this just for us. But as time went on he started drinking more and more beer. Sometimes tourists who didn't know any better bought it for him, but sometimes he took money out of the till to buy beer.

'William and I worked like crazy while he would just come in, grab a handful of money and disappear off in the car to Ukunda. Meanwhile I would be living in fear of the state he'd be in when he came back. At home I was barely allowed to leave our little hut and just sat there for hours on end playing with Napirai on the bed. He even used to come with me to the toilet. It was really depressing and all the arguments weren't good for Napirai either.'

Despite all my complaints I try to explain to my mother that Lketinga was still basically a good person deep down. There'd been so many times he'd shown his love for me. But he was unhappy in Mombasa and I couldn't go back to living in the bush or I'd die of malaria. I even suggested he go back to Barsaloi and find himself a second wife from his own tribe and leave me to work in Mombasa; that way we'd all be happier.

'But all of a sudden he doesn't want another wife, even though when we'd got married it was something I had to agree to. So I had no option in the end but to make a run for it and come back to Switzerland.' And that's the end of my story.

My mother has been sitting there horrified as I run through the chain of events and in the end she says, 'I gathered from your sister after her trip out to see you not so long ago that things weren't perfect

but I'd no idea it was that bad! Your letters home were always so full of optimism and confidence. But now things are all rather different but in one way at least I can say I've got my daughter back and a sweet little grandchild too!' We throw our arms around one another in relief. 'So it's not too much of a problem if Napirai and I stay here for a bit until we work out what we're going to do?' 'No, not at all, we've just got to convince the dog,' she says with a mock-timid laugh.

We spend the rest of the afternoon undoing my African plaits. My hair falls out in clumps in the process. Afterwards I relax thankfully in a deep bath of hot water, still barely able to comprehend how wonderful it is to be able to lie in a full tub. In Kenya I had to walk one and a half kilometers down to the river that had barely enough water in it to wash with. Even later on, down in Mombasa, I had to heat the water on our coal stove, then pour it into a washbasin and wash myself with my hands. Here in Switzerland, there's more water than anyone could need. All you have to do is turn a tap and you can have either hot water or cold. I had really forgotten in my time in Africa how easy life used to be. But now I realise, with literally every passing hour, how luxurious just our basic living conditions are, even the simplest things, like water, electricity, fridges and plentiful food.

No, there's nothing for me to worry about here. I can get a job doing something or other. The only thing that matters is getting a residence permit again! I decide to go down to the town hall the next morning to find out how to go about it. My mother comes along with me because she knows someone from her gym class who works there. What they tell me is that I have to apply in writing, including a curriculum vitae, for my right of residence to be restored. That will go to the immigration authorities and I simply have to wait for their decision. Back home I do what they ask, buoyed up with confidence because the people at the office were so nice. My experiences with officialdom in Kenya were very different.

For the next few days I do nothing but take long walks with my daughter just to stop thinking about Kenya all the time. Whenever the phone rings I worry that it could be Lketinga again or somebody else from Kenya with bad news. All my letters must have arrived there by now. Sometimes I can almost physically feel the sadness and emotion of all those concerned, especially my dear mother-in-law and even Lketinga who by now must have realised that we really are not coming back. Finally, on 3 November 1990, I receive a long letter written by James at school.

> Dear Corinne,
>
> Hello from James. How are you? I hope your family and my dear sister Napirai are well. I got your sad letter which

made me very sad too because you said you were in Switzerland and wouldn't be coming back to our village. Everybody who knows you here in Barsaloi is very unhappy. I feel like crying just writing to you, although I will only really be able to believe it all when I see it written on my brother's face down in Mombasa.

Corinne, I already felt in my blood what you are now telling me, when I saw how impossibly my brother was treating you. But what am I to say to everyone who asks where our dear Corinne is and why she has left? It is a curse that you had to leave because of Lketinga. He will be very lonely here now; everybody is cross with him because they saw how hard you worked.

All the things you want to give him will only confuse him. Ill help him and try to make sure everything is done properly, although I don't have that much influence over him. You know I used to argue with him a lot because he was so mean to you, his wife. Without you, my brother is now considered a useless person in our society, even with his car and shop. What can he do with a big shop when, as you know, he hates work? And what can he do with a car when he doesn't have a driving license?

The fact that you have left him all this, shows that you still love him in your heart. But he doesn't understand any of that and can't deal with it. Corinne, he is very confused and I'm sure he still loves you but his problem is that he talks like a bad person and doesn't think about how other people react to what he says. The only advice I can give him is to use the money you have left him.

But how can he sell the shop if you aren't here? Unless you ring up the Indian, the owner of the building. I have written my brother a letter telling him he has to send me money for the trip to Mombasa so I can come down and see him when the school term ends on 16 November. If he won't send me any, I shall go home and sell a couple of goats, then I'll go down and see what he's doing. I'll write to you in November or December to tell you how things are going and how things are back home with Mama.

Corinne, I don't think my brother will get married again simply because of you. I think he'll stay in Mombasa for the rest of his life, living on what you have left for him. In his position I would be ashamed to go home. I really don't know how I'm going to tell Mama and the rest of the family.

I hope you find somewhere to live in Switzerland or

Germany so we can stay in touch. I'm sure Lketinga still loves you and will pine for you. I'll write and tell you everything. But please keep in touch with me, wherever you are in the world. I know God loves you and will find you a good home. Please don't forget us, think of us, you are part of our family wherever you are. We will never forget you, your family or our dearly beloved sister Napirai.

Think about coming back to see us in the months or years to come so that we can meet again, and send us photos or other things to remind us of you and your family. I will do my best to send you something so you can see you are not cut off from our family, because we love you. I have still one and a half years to do in school, then I'd like to get a job, earn money and invite you to come and visit us.

Please tell your brother Marc that the problem was not my family but just Lketinga. I'll end now Corinne with a sad face and in the hope of hearing from you soon.

Give our best wishes to your whole family, Marc and his girlfriend, and of course to Napirai.

I wish you all a very happy Christmas,

James

The letter opens up all those unhealed wounds again and I drop it and burst into tears. Despite everything, the last thing I want is for Lketinga to lose face with his tribe. I feel totally miserable and once again plagued with doubts! I tell all this to my mother who's sitting at the table watching me earnestly.

'Look at yourself in the mirror,' she says, 'and you'll see you had no other choice. Even after two weeks you still look sick and you're so weak you have to sleep all the time. You have to stick to special foods because of your hepatitis and you're still nursing your baby. How do you think you're going to manage? You have to think of yourself and Napirai. You've got enough problems.'

She sounds stern but it's just what I need right now; I feel like a child in need of looking after again.

That afternoon I write back to James, thanking him for planning to go down to Mombasa to see Lketinga. It's a huge journey for him. He's only sixteen years old and only came down to Mombasa once, when we moved away from the Samburu district and drove the 1,460 kilometers to the coast. He came with us so that he and Lketinga could take turns holding Napirai during the bumpy ride. But now he'll have to make the journey on his own which is something people out there simply aren't used to; normally they always travel in pairs. The two- to three-day journey on the bus is expensive and as he says in the letter

he'll have to sell a couple of goats to get the money for the ticket.

Lketinga won't send him any, because money sent in envelopes just disappears en route and James is still a schoolboy and doesn't have a bank account. In fact, very few of the people I know out there have any money at all. Their wealth is their animals and if they need money they sell one or just the pelt of a slaughtered goat or cow to buy the essentials. I hope James manages it and Lketinga reimburses him the money.

* * *

Napirai meanwhile has got used to the cold weather and doesn't protest any more when we try to put clothes on her. I use my last 'emergency pennies' to buy us winter clothing in some second-hand shops. I don't want to be a financial burden on my mother. It's costing her enough just to feed us. In any case she's always buying things for Napirai. Our relations with the dog have also improved although he can still be unpredictable.

From time to time my mother tries to get me to go and visit some of my old friends in order to get me out of the house and into company again. But I'm afraid of driving her car in the hectic traffic, and on the right-hand side of the road. Back in Africa you might run into elephants or buffalo on a road, which could be dangerous enough, but here in Switzerland I have the impression that everyone is out on the roads in their cars at the same time. So I'd rather stay at home with Napirai.

One evening in mid-November the phone rings and I feel immediately that it's going to be a call from Kenya. It turns out to be Sophia. I can cope better now that I've been nearly a month back in Switzerland and everybody knows what's what.

'Hallo Corinne, how are you and Napirai? Are you still certain you're not coming back? Lketinga isn't doing much work. Whenever I pass the shop it's usually closed. I just wanted to tell you that your husband won't let me help him, and I don't know what to do about it. I've got my own problems as you know, because even though I've opened up my restaurant I still haven't got a work permit. And apart from that, other things are still the same! In any case I'm flying out to Italy in four days to spend a couple of weeks with my family.'

'Sophia,' I reply, 'it's really nice of you to call me to let me know but I've made up my mind. I'm just pleased to be alive and to have got out of the country with Napirai. You don't need to worry about Lketinga any more, because I believe lames is coming to Mombasa soon to help him and to decide what to do about the shop. I know

how suspicious my husband can be. Have you seen him though and if so, how is he?' Sophia says she hasn't bumped into him for ages and the last time she did see him he was out in the car in Ukunda. She doesn't know any more than that. I say goodbye and give her my love and hope, from the bottom of my heart, that things work out well for her in Kenya. At that point, however, I wasn't aware that I'd never hear from Sophia again.

A few days later a letter comes back from Father Giuliani:

> Dear Corinne,
>
> I only received your letter of 26 October a couple of days ago which is why I'm just replying now.
>
> I think it is better for you to stay in Switzerland. I was in any case amazed at how long you lasted with Lketinga. He often seemed a bit strange even to me and I frequently wondered how long you and he would stay together. As ever I send you my best wishes for a better life with your Napirai.
>
> You mention in your letter that you'd enclosed some money for Lketinga's mother, but there was nothing in the envelope. It is dangerous to enclose money in envelopes here because they get opened and then sometimes even the letter itself goes astray. If you have a checkbook from Barclay's Bank you can make one out to the Catholic Mission here. I will pay it in and pass on the relevant sum to Mama Lepimorijo. I think that will be the best way.
>
> Best wishes from Barsaloi. It's the rainy season here now and everything is green and wonderful.
>
> Best wishes also from Father Roberto,
>
> *Your Giuliani*

I'm pleased to get this little letter and glad to know I now have a way to keep my promise to my mother-in-law. When we left for Mombasa I promised her I would never stop thinking about her, never forget her and always look after her, no matter where I was living. I was so happy that she hadn't taken my Napirai away from me. After all it is their custom that the first girl of a family is given to the husband's mother as a sort of old-age pension.

As the girl grows she fetches wood for her grandmother, looks after her goats and fetches water from the river. In return she gets board and lodging. When she reaches marriageable age — between thirteen and sixteen — she is married off and the grandmother gets the dowry, which is normally made up of several goats, cows, sugar and such like. That's how Lketinga explained it to me after Napirai was born: a custom that I simply couldn't imagine myself complying

with.

Even Saguna, the three-year-old daughter of his elder brother already lived with the old lady. Although her mother lived in the same corral, the child ate and slept at her grandmother's. Her brother, however, who was two years older, lived with his parents in the next hut. Indeed, I have my mother-in-law to thank that she let me keep Napirai. I explained to her that I couldn't live without my child and she gave me a long silent look and then placed Napirai back in my arms, even though she reckoned I would have another ten children.

Now I want to keep my promise and as soon as I earn some money I intend to send her some. Until I am able to get a job, I can write cheques on my existing bank accounts in Kenya and ask the mission to pass a certain amount on to her each month. That's the only way to make sure her big extended family doesn't use up all the money in a couple of days. Lketinga must have easily enough money with everything I've left behind for him.

On the other hand if he's not working, like Sophia said on the phone, and is just living on the cash he's soon going to run into difficulties. I look forward to finding out soon how things are going down there, as James must have got to Mombasa by now. Everyday I wait for the post to see if there's a letter from Kenya. Even two months on I still feel very responsible, although I've left everything I own behind me in Kenya. Eventually the letter I've been waiting for from James arrives.

> Dear Corinne and family,
>
> This is James writing to you from Mombasa after receiving your letter of December 6. How are you, your family and our dear little Napirai? I hope you're all well Lketinga and I are not bad. I can't tell you much about the rest of the family because I haven't heard from them for a long time. According to your letter you still haven't found somewhere to live. I will say my prayers for you in the hope this problem will sort itself out. I have also found out you tried to help our mother by sending some money but it didn't get there.
>
> I have spoken to Lketinga about the shop. He has decided to sell it. Please get in touch with the owner therefore and ask him to sell the lease for him. I will also try to talk to his brother like you suggested. Lketinga doesn't want to sell the car or to share the money. So I shall be going back to Maralal and don't think he'll give me money for the trip. He's drinking a lot and also chewing lots of miraa. Please do something to try to get the shop sold so that

he doesn't run into debt with the Indian. I have also written to Diners Club to get the shop card blocked.

Corinne, on December 10 I'm going to go back to Barsaloi and am really very sad that my brother has given me no money except for my fare home. I don't know what I can take back for Mama and the school. This is the last time in my life I visit Lketinga. I took 12,000 Kenyan shillings working in the shop but he has used it all up. He kept coming and saying he was going to take it to the bank but he spent it on beer and miraa, I'm afraid to say, Corinne, that is the sad truth.

I will open a bank account of my own like you suggested so you can send me something to help my family. I will go back to Barsaloi and ask Richard for credit to open the account. Then I will send you the number.

I suspect my brothers life is going to be a short one. Since you left I haven't enjoyed his company as he won't do anything to help anyone else, even though he's the one who has money. I will tell our mother what you wrote to me and that I'm going to open a bank account so you can help us. I will also tell her about the problems my brother's causing. Back in Barsaloi I will sell our few goats so I can take the money I need for school.

I can't say what problems my family might have right now because I am still going to school and haven't seen them for a long time. Please send us some photos from Napirai and your family.

I wish you all a happy new year,

Your James

I'm furious after reading this letter. Reading it a second time I realise that there must have been an earlier letter which I didn't get. So I still don't know how people back in Barsaloi reacted to us running away or how James got enough money to go down to Mombasa. I also gather that he hasn't been back to Barsaloi but has gone straight down to Mombasa from Eldoret at the end of the school term. But what really makes me mad is that after everything James has done for him, Lketinga won't even give him the money to pay his school fees. He went down to Mombasa on my request to help Lketinga and support him and he leaves him in he lurch, his little brother!

I know how different the two of them are. James is about thirteen years younger — nobody is quite sure which year anyone was born. His age is just calculated approximately by the tribal District Officer. None of them knows their birthday. But the big difference between

them is that James goes to school, and Lketinga never did. As a result they seem to belong to completely different worlds.

Lketinga, who until recently was considered a ‘warrior’ by his tribe, can't read or write and grew up in the bush with all the old rituals and customs. James on the other hand is the youngest of the family and since he was seven years old has been the first of them to go to the school run by the mission. When there were differences of opinion I remember Lketinga saying, ‘Bah, they're not real men any more. They've never been out in the bush, they just sit in school instead. They don't know about life!’

On the other side James and the other schoolboys say: ‘You know you just can't talk to these people because they know nothing about the world. All they know is the bush and how to survive with their animals. They have no idea what's going on in the world outside.’

Sometimes I used to think they hardly knew each other at all. Even so I had assumed that in a situation like this, Lketinga would have trusted his brother and helped him out.

I'm so angered by reading the letter that I decide to do something about it straight away. I get the Indian's telephone number from international directory inquiries and get in touch with him. He's very surprised by my news and the fact that I'm not coming back. lust a few days ago Lketinga told him I was on holiday and would be back shortly. He's sorry to hear of my decision but agrees to talk to Lketinga about taking the shop back as he can't see it surviving if I'm not there. I thank him, relieved that at last the shop won't be a problem for Lketinga much longer. I have no idea what he'll do with the money. I can only hope that he doesn't spend it all on beer and *miraa.* I immediately write to James to tell him what's been agreed.

At least one good thing has come out of all this fuss. Here in Switzerland I'm just sitting around doing nothing waiting to hear from the immigration authorities. But when it comes to Kenya I'm astonished at how quickly and efficiently I can act to get things done. It's good for my self-confidence and makes me keen to get back into work again. My new surroundings no longer seem as alien as they initially did and I'm gradually putting on weight again. I'm trying to eat normal food more often rather than stick to my special diet and I'm delighted to find that as the weeks pass I'm having fewer stomach problems.

* * *

Shortly before Christmas, Napirai and I are delighted by her first sight of snow. It really is incredibly cold but it doesn't bother me any

more. On the contrary in fact, I find the weather here suddenly far more interesting than a clear blue sky day after day and an unforgiving sun shriveling up the vegetation. And then when it does rain after months of endless sunshine, there are floods everywhere and people and animals run the risk of getting swept away to their deaths. I'm happy again just to see rain, snow and even fog.

A few days before Christmas we go shopping with my mother down in Rapperswil. I find all the excess in the shops just incredible, and decide that from now on I will make do with the bare minimum. This overabundance is really unnecessary. Purely by chance I bump into my first boss from way back when I had my first job selling insurance. After two years working for that firm I'd saved enough to open up my own bridal wear shop. I had been so taken with the idea of buying and selling new and second-hand clothes that I'd taken the risk of setting up my own business. He on the other hand had been sorry to see me go. Now here he is standing opposite me listening in astonishment to all my stories. By the end he gives me his card and says he'd be glad to give me a job again whenever I want; all I have to do is give him a call. We say goodbye and I beam at my mother and say: ‘You see, it's going to be easy for me to find a job again.’

Even though I don't really want to go back into the insurance business, the chance meeting has cheered me up enormously. It's been a big boost for my self-confidence. Apart from anything else it was the first conversation I've had with another man, and one who knew me back in the days when I positively oozed self-confidence. And straight away he makes me a job offer! Whether it was a serious offer or not, I feel like I'm in seventh heaven just because he showed belief in me. I tell my mother that as soon as the holidays are over I'm going to get on to the immigration authorities to find out what's happening to our case, especially as my three-month residence permit will be about to run out. She says I might be better to just wait quietly for them to get back to me.

I'm really excited about having a proper Christmas once again, with cold weather and snow and all that goes with it. It never really felt like Christmas in Kenya as it was almost always unbearably hot. The only thing back there that made me realise it was Christmas was all the old people in Barsaloi making their pilgrimage up to the mission to get some maize meal and new woolen blankets. All those who regularly attended the ‘bush church’ were entitled to these presents at the end of the year and Mama obviously wasn't going to be left out. I would watch each year, smiling inwardly to myself, as she got ready for her calculating little trip to the mission.

On Christmas Eve we have nearly my whole family together as it's my mother's birthday the next day. Only Eric, my younger brother,

and his wife Jelly are turning up two days later as they want to spend Christmas itself in their own home with their two sons. Already there are piles of presents under the tree for my little girl. Everyone wants to give her something and Napirai just sits there in amazement.

Then she starts ripping the paper off one after another and doesn't know which to start playing with first. Two or three parcels would have been more than enough for her. Where are we going to put all this stuff? In any case Napirai is happiest of all when I take her out to the playground to play with other children.

But I really do enjoy sitting down with my family at a beautifully laid table for our traditional fondue bourguignonne. Then all of a sudden, looking at the plate piled high with an enormous amount of meat I burst out laughing. When everyone stares at me curiously I have to tell them what it is that amused me so much: 'If Lketinga was here he simply wouldn't comprehend that this little pile of meat is going to be enough for all of us. He and another warrior could easily polish off an entire medium-sized goat in a single night.'

'Well he couldn't do it here, not least because of the price of meat,' says Hanspeter with a smile. But my thoughts are back with Lketinga and I can't help wondering what he's doing now.

Some days now simply drag on and on while others flash by in a trice. New Year's Eve is one of those days that just doesn't seem to end. We don't make a big thing of it as we're all locked in our own little worlds. The one thing I want more than anything from the immediate future is for us to get Swiss residency. I'm not worried about anything else.

Early in the new year, the Indian shop owner rings me up and says he was ready to take it back again but Lketinga has changed his mind and wants to keep working in it. So now he's expecting rental in advance for the next three months. I tell him he'll have to deal with Lketinga; I've paid until the end of the year and if Lketinga wants to keep on the shop he'll have to take responsibility for it. I tell him I've left all my money in Kenya with my husband and have no influence over him any more.

Nonetheless I'm worried at the idea of Lketinga trying to keep on with the shop and can only hope he's found someone good to help him.

* * *

It's exactly three months since my arrival back in Switzerland when a letter arrives from the immigration authorities. My heart is pounding as I open it — this could decide the whole future course of

my life, or at least which country I spend it in. But after reading the first two sentences, I'm both relieved and disappointed: all it says is that they require more information about all the members of my family.

I fill in all the details as precisely as possible and stress in a letter that I am not expecting any sort of income support as I have my family to support me in any conceivable financial difficulties. Apart from that I mention that I have already had a concrete offer of work. Confidently, I send off the documents again. My mother however comes over all sad saying she's got so used to having Napirai and me around she couldn't bear it if we had to move abroad again. I do my best to console her: 'Everything's going to be fine. Otherwise they'd already have deported me in the last three months.'

* * *

By the end of January, it's so cold that the nearby lake, Pfaffikersee, has frozen over, something that only happened every ten years or so at most. So we all head out to walk on the ice, with Napirai wrapped up warm and being pulled on a sledge behind us. I watch in amazement at all these people merrily careering around on the ice on all sorts of strange conveyances. Totally crazy: only three months ago I was sweating in a totally alien world and now here I am strolling about on a frozen lake. Even now I'm still automatically drawing comparisons every day with things back in Africa. Looking at all these happy faces, old and young, I'm still struck by how cut off from one another most of them are in their daily lives, and how little respect young people show to their elders. Before I lived in Africa I hadn't noticed, but now I can't help comparing them with the Samburu. Back there people are respected more and more as they get older. Good looks may fade but respect increases. The older a person is, male or female, the more their decisions are respected. Young people don't do anything without their elders' approval. When James came back home from school in the holidays he would go to his mother and bow his head before her without looking her in the eye. Only when he was telling his stories about the past term would he gradually glance at her briefly. A Masai grandmother is normally surrounded by a host of children and everyone who passes, man or woman, young or old, friend or stranger, says hello to her and stops for a chat. Even though my mother-in-law spends all day just sitting under a tree outside her hut, life is never dull for her.

Compare that to the way things are back here in Switzerland: I can't help noticing how many people there are sitting on their own in

cafes or restaurants. Nobody pays them any attention, nobody talks to them. People here have more material things than they could ever need, yet they have no time for one another, no social network to support them. The other side of the coin is that people here can get by living on their own. Amidst the Kenyan Masai that would simply be inconceivable.

When we get back from our walk on the ice I find a letter from James, written on January 12. I open it excitedly looking for news about Mama and people at home in Barsaloi.

> Dear Corinne and family,
>
> I was delighted to receive your long letter today and really pleased to see the photos of you and Napirai and your mother. I took the photos to show Mama and she cried, but I consoled her and told her that hopefully you would come and see us when I have finished school. Everybody here was happy to see the photos of you and Napirai. I told the family you only left because of Lketinga and they knew it was true because I came back from Mombasa with nothing for them. They all say he can stay there; in next to no time there'll be nothing left of all the money you left behind.
>
> Corinne, I'm not going back to Mombasa because I don't want to face all the problems I told you about again. It's good that you've sold the shop so not everything has been lost. If Lketinga comes home I'll help him here. On the twelfth I'm going off to school from Maralal. Richard helped me open a bank account in Maralal, so you can send us money there if you want to.
>
> I told Mama and the rest of the family everything you and your family wrote to me. Some of them were. disappointed that you had left but understood you had no choice. They all said they'd like to see you again if you come back home, even just for a visit. But it would be better if I was there at the time. You also said you wanted to send some things to me; you can send them to me in school, that's easy, but please don't send anything that I'll have to pay money to the post office for. I'll be in school for the next three months and will try to get in touch with you from there.
>
> Giuliani and Roberto are still in Barsaloi. It's very green there now and we have lots of milk. Our family isn't there any more, however. They've moved about two kilometers away towards Lpusi. We don't have as many goats as we used to. Your black goats and the buck with the white spots

have grown really big. One day in the holidays I'll take pictures of my family and the animals and send them to you. I got the little radio from Lketinga and have it with me in school. That's the only good thing he gave me.

I took some of your clothing, skirts mostly, and Mama wears them now. I had to steal them when I was leaving because Lketinga wouldn't let me have them.

Please send me the address of your brother Marc so I can send him some news about the family and me so he doesn't forget us. If he wants to come to Barsaloi some time, like we spoke about, I'd be pleased to welcome him and show him around.

Best wishes to your family and friends and our dear little sister Napirai. I pray that you will be successful in your life in Switzerland.

Your brother,

James

P. S. A last word from the family: they all send their best wishes to you and Napirai and hope you enjoy Switzerland but they would be happy to see you again back here, even if just for a visit.

The letter cheers me up. I'm pleased the people back in Barsaloi aren't upset with me and would welcome us back. It's particularly important for Napirai. I feel as if a weight has been lifted from my shoulders and could give my mother-in-law a big kiss on her shaven head. I write back with a light heart.

Two days later a letter arrives from a German woman living in Kenya and I realise that I must have met her briefly. She wants to buy the car from Lketinga and needs the enclosed documents signed by me. The car got damaged by a fire but she still wants to buy it and have it repaired. I can hardly believe what I'm reading: my lovely expensive car half burnt-out! Obviously Lketinga isn't going to keep the shop on, despite what the Indian told me. How could he fetch new stock for the shop without a car? But how is he? Was he injured in whatever accident he must have had? I couldn't care less about the car but I could burst into tears. At the same time, I can't help wondering what happened. He probably had the car full of Masai going to one of their performances, all smoking, and he probably never topped up the oil or water.

All these thoughts are running through my head as I sit there studying the documents. I would really like to lift the phone and call

Kenya to talk to Lketinga. But nobody I know out there has a phone. Most of them, even down by the coast and the tourist industry, don't even have electricity. The only light they have comes from oil lamps. So there's nothing I can do but fill in the forms, send them off and wait to see what more I hear.

Getting Used to Our New Lives

At the end of February my mother points out a notice in the paper about setting up a self-help group for all single mothers in the district. ‘Go and sign up,’ she tells me sensibly, ‘and you'll get to meet people again and make friends.’ I hesitate a bit but eventually I do indeed sign up. In mid-March I get an invitation to a Sunday brunch where we're all supposed to get to know one another.

The meeting is held in a cosy little forest chalet on the fringes of the village. When I arrive with Napirai there are already a few women there with their toddlers. Some of the children are running around the place, a few others clinging to their mothers. Napirai isn't in the slightest shy and goes up to the other children and looks at them closely. They look closely back as she is the only non-white child. More and more women keep arriving until we're up to nearly twenty adults.

The tables are all laid and there's the smell of coffee in the air. The two founder members introduce themselves and explain that the idea is to meet up for brunch once a month to talk to each other about our problems and help each other out where we can. Those of us who are stronger should help the weaker and gradually we'll all build up a network of social contacts. After that everyone introduces themselves individually and explains how they come to be bringing up their children on their own.

A lot of sad and often very moving stories come out. Some of the women come across as very self-confident while others are very shy and quiet. A few of them have been on their own for years while others, myself included, have only been on their own for a few months. As I start telling my story most of them want to keep on hearing more and more. A lot of them find my life really crazy, unusual and difficult, although it seems to me some of them have had much bigger problems. Some of them are struggling to make ends meet or to get custody of their children. Others are still struggling to come to term with their separation, particularly those whose husbands left them. My situation seems much easier than theirs. I'm still living on the bit of cash I have left and am just waiting for a work permit to get a new job. I certainly don't have the problem of trying to get maintenance money from my husband.

I can't help comparing the situation I'm in now with the way things sometimes were when I was living in Africa, occasionally at death's door and struggling just to stay alive. Back there I had pretty much to rely on myself most of the time, with no connection to the civilized outside world and almost none of the local Maa language.

Days went by when I wouldn't exchange a word with anyone. Running away from our village into the Kenyan highlands was unthinkable because none of the women would have helped me, even by coming along to hold little Napirai as I drove along the treacherous jungle roads. They wouldn't even have done it for any amount of money I could have given them because if they had, they'd never have been allowed back to their tribes. Masai men have no sympathy whatsoever for a woman who wants to run away from her husband.

Here, on the other hand, there are people to talk to who understand and want to help. All you have to do is go and find them. No, as far as I'm concerned it's been a lot easier to be a lone mother in Switzerland and it'll be a lot easier still once I get a job, I'm certain of that. Some of the women warn me not to be quite so euphoric in my attitude as I might find there aren't that many jobs for women in our situation. I'm going to have to find someone to look after Napirai. A lot of the mothers find it a bit weird that I'm still breastfeeding Napirai at age two. But I don't let them worry me. I'll cross those bridges when I come to them.

One of the women, called Madeleine, comes up and sits down next to me and tells me she's off to Kenya at the end of April for a holiday, at last, to get over her divorce. When she tells me she's planning to go down to the south coast we agree that I should come round to her house some time so I can give her more information about Kenya and show her where our shop is. That way she can go past and take a look and maybe even talk to Lketinga.

I'm rather taken with her, and also with two or three of the other women, in particular one of the organizers who just oozes energy. We end up choosing her as our chairwoman. There are some, however, that I don't even get the chance to speak to. The time just flies by and before long we're all clearing away the plates and doing the washing-up. The chalet has to be cleaned and then we say our goodbyes, arranging to meet again in four weeks time.

On the way home I keep thinking about all the different life stories I've just heard. One way or another, the meeting has been good for me. For one thing I'm really keen on seeing more of some of these women outside the group. For another I've realised that I shouldn't just let things trundle along until I've got no money left. For the first time I've been made to confront the problems that lone mothers face. Before I went to Africa I was a successful businesswoman with no interest in having children, and in Africa it's common for many women to have to cope with lots of children on their own. As a result I'd never really thought about it. But after today I realise that there are lots of women who just surrender to their fate as if they've been crippled. There's no way I'm going to let that happen to me!

Back home I tell my mother my impressions and also that I'm keen to join the group, not least because Napirai enjoyed running around with the other children. Tomorrow I'm going to get on to the immigration people to see what's going on; after all, we've been here five months now.

When I lift the phone to call them the next morning, I realise with every fiber of my being that this is a hugely important moment. My mother is sitting there on the sofa with Napirai, watching me and almost certain praying.

When I finally get through to the right department I explain my situation to the woman on the other end. In a friendly voice she tells me to hang on and she'll go and see what's happening. I'll never forget those minutes hanging on the end of the phone. My heart was pounding and I could feel a terrible tightness gripping my chest harder and harder.

The minutes and seconds seem to last an eternity. ‘Dear God, please help us one more time,’ I pray, silently crossing my fingers at the same time. At long last I hear the woman's voice back on the other end of the line. ‘Your name is Corinne Hofmann and you're currently residing at Wetzikon with your daughter Napirai, born 1 July 1989, is that right?’ ‘Yes,’ I manage to croak. ‘Your application has been passed. You'll get it all in writing in the next few days.’ I've been holding my breath and suddenly it all comes pouring out: ‘Thank you, thank you very much, you've just made me the happiest woman on earth. Goodbye.’ I turn round and cry out ecstatically, ‘Thank God! We can stay!’

I feel as if I've been given a new lease of life and dance around the flat with Napirai in my arms. She's laughing and giggling even though she clearly hasn't the faintest idea why her mother's gone so daft. My mother is in tears of relief and I'm so happy I can't even think straight. Everything's going to be fine now. I'm going to do everything I can to get a job and a flat of our own. I ring up my brothers and sister to tell them the good news, and also sit down and write a letter to James to tell him too. I'm so excited I can hardly control myself. Not since my daughter was born have I been so over the moon because of a single sentence spoken by a woman I don't know. It really is the start of a new life. I wonder if she knows the effect those words of hers can have. But then I dismiss all other thoughts from my head: the main thing is I've got what I wanted. As soon as I've got the written confirmation, I shall put an ad seeking a job in the local paper.

That evening Hanspeter is equally delighted by my good news. Over dinner we discuss what job I could do. I suggest I might start in a newspaper kiosk. If I got an early shift I could be home by lunch to look after Napirai. My mother offers to look after Napirai two to three

days a week as she's got used to having her grand-daughter around and they get on well together.

Hanspeter and I sit down and work out a budget for how much I'll need if I'm to have a flat of my own. Doing that soon makes me realise that if we're not to be on the brink of starvation I'll need to find a full-time job. I'm going to have to furnish the flat from scratch. Not to mention finding crockery, cutlery, towels as well as furniture. That means that basically a job as a sales representative is going to suit me best as it means I can ration my own time and if I'm on commission there's the chance of making more money faster.

My mother reminds me of my old boss at the insurance company, but although I was really pleased to get the job, I don't go for the idea of selling insurance door-to-door because it would mean primarily working evenings. I'd rather find something interesting to do during the day, so I decide to go ahead and put an ad in the paper.

Obviously I need to work on my appearance. I urgently need a new haircut and ought to buy a couple of suits. But that's what second-hand shops are for. I may also need to buy a car although here in Switzerland that's not the problem it is in Kenya. There are second-hand car dealers on every corner and an affordable car should be easy to find.

The biggest problem I face is my own lack of self-confidence. I still think I'm very brave going up to new people and trying to get them to like me. Just the idea of going out in the city traffic and trying to find streets I don't know horrifies me. But I could do it before so I must be able to do it again. At least now everything seems more manageable than it did four months ago. When I think that back in Kenya there were moments when I was so weak I could hardly even stand and fifty meters seemed an unimaginable distance to walk, I feel, in relative terms, a tower of strength. I'll manage it all, I know I will.

* * *

A couple of days later I finally get my written residency permit. The other thing I have to do now is sort out the question of my marriage. They tell me that here in Switzerland it has no legal status. As I'm a German citizen the issue will have to be resolved in Berlin and the Swiss will then abide by the German decision. It seems it's not clear whether I count as legally married or single in Europe. Right now, however, I'm not too bothered about it. It's only a year later that I'm to find out the consequences. Right now it's enough for me just to be happy.

I've put my 'job wanted' ad in the paper hoping to get an offer of something in sales. I'm also studying the flats-to-let adverts but my enthusiasm is soon dampened by the lack of choice. Obviously I don't have to move out of my mother's straight away but sooner or later, especially when I have a job, I want to have a place to call my own.

* * *

Two weeks after our first meeting at the single mother's group Madeleine calls and invites me and Napirai to come over for coffee. She lives only a few minutes' drive away in the next village beyond Wetzikon. I like where she lives at first sight: four flat blocks together arranged in a square with a large green area and children's playground in the middle where a few toddlers are running around. Napirai would like that! I'm also taken by the forest nearby and a little stream.

Madeleine is pleased to see us. Her son is ten years old and has the patience of an angel in dealing with Napirai. We tell each other our life stories in detail and she's pleased to. hear we've got our Swiss residency permits. I tell her I'm fairly confident of finding a job soon but getting a flat looks harder as I'd really like to find something like she has. Madeleine offers to ask the housing association but says I shouldn't get my hopes up because there are waiting lists for well-priced, well-located flats like these. But I like the place so much I'm going to keep hoping.

I show her pictures of my husband and our shop in Kenya and ask her to look him up when she's there on holiday to give him a letter from me. It would also be nice if she could find out what's up with Sophia. It seems like an extraordinary coincidence that on my first excursion out to meet people I should have come across someone who's flying out to Kenya soon. There's a bitter-sweet taste in my mouth as I wish her happy holidays.

Back home I rave to my mother about the area where she lives. I'm determined not to look anywhere else as long as the local housing association doesn't say there's no hope.

Over the next few days I get a few job offers in the post. Most are useless: either I don't like the product they want me to sell or the firms concerned don't offer even a minimum salary, and in my situation I can't afford to take a risk like that. When I'm just about giving up hope of getting any joy from my advert, an interesting job offer comes in from Zurich. They sell silk scarves and ties to companies, which they in turn hand out as promotional gifts. I take a look at their catalogues and feel this might be a decent opportunity. Immediately I ring them up and arrange to go for an interview.

Now it's up to me. Getting my first job after living abroad for so long will be difficult. I buy a map of Zurich and a nice suit. Being so tall and thin at least gives me the advantage that most off-the-peg clothes look good on me. I go to the hairdresser's and for the first time in my life have my hair cut short, and dyed red. A new pair of shoes with heels, not too high, adds the finishing touch. The transformation is such that at first my mother doesn't recognize me and even Napirai stares at me uncertainly for a few minutes. It's only my voice that she recognizes initially, but when I lift her and put her to my breast she's reassured that this really is her mother.

I want to be as relaxed as possible for the interview so I decide to take the train to Zurich rather than go by car. But I fall at the very first hurdle at the station. I need to buy a ticket at the counter but there's a huge queue of people and not much time before the train goes. I push through to ask the man at the counter if I can buy a ticket to Zurich on the train. He gives me a dismissive look and says, 'No, not on this train. You can buy a ticket from the machine on the platform.'

There's just two minutes before the train arrives. I rush to the right platform and find the machine but all I can make out is a confusing array of arrows and numbers. I'm standing there like a Stone Age man without the faintest idea how to buy a ticket. A young lad rather condescendingly explains it to me, making me want to sink through the floor. My four years in the bush have turned me into a real bumpkin.

Finding my way around Zurich is my next challenge. Eventually by asking people I manage to find the right address but by now my nice new suit is drenched in sweat. Luckily I've got ten minutes to pull myself together.

The showroom has a display of their scarves in all sorts of magnificent colors. A woman of about fifty greets me and after I've explained who I am she calls her husband who's in charge of recruitment. He's a small, elderly but vivacious man and straight away starts showing me their different fabrics and grades. I'm not at all sure what to make of this pair but their merchandise is good and would be easy to sell. I see that at once. The man invites me into his office and we sit down for a chat. He's not very impressed when he hears I've just returned from living abroad as it means I don't have any references.

I make a point of telling him that I ran a souvenir shop in Mombasa. When he asks if I'm married I say no, as in any case it still seems uncertain what my legal status here is. He says that's a good thing because often husbands get jealous if they have wives who're out and about selling things all day. He doesn't ask about children so I don't mention my daughter. Finally we talk money. Incredibly he

agrees easily to the terms I suggest, but tells me he has someone else interested in the job whom he has to interview and that I should think it over too. I tell him I don't have any notice to work and would like to start as soon as possible. He gives a laugh and says, 'I'll call you in a couple of days time.'

Even though I don't know whether or not I'll get the job, on the way back to the station I'm already trying to work out how I'd go about it as they don't have any firm clients at present and the whole business needs building up from nothing. Up until now they've just been acting as wholesalers, selling on to clothes shops. I would have to persuade clients in industry to take on their expensive designer goods to hand out as promotional gifts. I'm really keen on the job though because instead of selling dull insurance packages I'd be pushing really attractive products. My journey home goes smoothly and I smile inwardly to myself: 'You see, Corinne, every working day will make life back here easier and more familiar.'

As soon as I get in, Napirai charges at me pulling up my pullover to get at my breast. Oh how I love my little girl with her crinkly brown hair and black cherry eyes. It's going to be a real change when we're no longer together all day every day. But I know she's fine with my mother who loves her as if she were her own daughter.

Now, however, we're going to have to find a childminder to look after Napirai for the other two days of the week. I'd really prefer someone who already has children as Napirai misses playing with children her own age. Wetzikon has a family advice bureau and I go down there the next day to ask them how to find a suitable family. The elderly lady there is very nice and helpful and promises me she'll ask around and let me know as soon as possible. Relieved and grateful to her, I take a stroll around the village, amazed at how easy life has become. I can talk to anybody here and everyone understands me. I can ask whatever I want to know and there are people ready to tell me the answer or even to help. Strangely, as time goes by I'm gradually realizing more and more just how hard my life in Kenya was. It was only because I was blinded by my great love for Lketinga that I didn't notice it then.

Now I've made a start on finding work, a flat and childcare and all I have to do is wait for others to make decisions. I get the feeling things are going to change radically from now on and I can't wait to see how.

That evening Madeleine rings up to tell me that unfortunately there are no flats free at present and there's a waiting list for all of them. Nonetheless she gives me the address of the housing association, and says it might be better if I get in touch with them myself. I thank her and wish her happy holidays again as she's off the next day. But

I'm disappointed with having to come to terms with her news and decide to leave it for a day or two before I do anything more.

I also haven't heard any more from my prospective employer yet. I really want to fight to get this job, particularly as I haven't had any other offers, so I ring him up to ask if he's made a decision yet. The lively old man tries to avoid giving a straight answer, so I come out and ask him what the problem is: Well, he says, he's not sure I'm the right person for the job. He might be ready to give me a chance but not on the salary we discussed as after all I don't have any experience. I really would have to drop my wage demand.

I reply indignantly that I'm worth every penny. ‘Anyone who can run a business successfully in Africa is going to be successful here.’ After a bit of toing and froing he agrees to let me start on May 1. Two days later I've got the contract in my hands. I've got the very first job I went for. How lucky can I get!

Back On My Own Two Feet

I've got two weeks to prepare myself and buy a car. Although I'm looking forward to the challenge, sometimes I have to ask myself if I really am up to making my way in the world of business again. The next few days are hectic. I find an old Ford which I can just afford but the expense of insuring it uses up my last penny. It really is time to start earning some money.

Three days before I'm due to start work the nice woman from the family advisory service rings up. We're in luck: they've found a nice couple in Wetzikon with a boy the same age as Napirai and have already spoken to them about acting as childminders. It's up to me now to go and meet them along with Napirai. It's important that we like each other and have the same ideas about bringing up children. I ring them up and arrange a time to go and see them.

They turn out to be gentle, well-balanced people and during the course of our meeting I find myself liking them more and more. The two children seem to get on well together too. Before long the two of them are sitting on the floor playing peacefully with the boy's toys. After we've sized each other up we agree that I'll bring Napirai round on Thursdays and Fridays. Her grandmother will look after her the rest of the week. Now that we've got that sorted I can finally start my job.

My first day at work flies by. We've agreed that I should spend the first week working in the shop, getting familiar with the products and learning the different patterns and their names. It's all very new and exciting and it's only in the car on the way back that I realise how tired I am all of a sudden. I could nod off on the spot. Struggling with my exhaustion I suddenly recall what the doctor at the hospital in Wamba said. He told me that because of my serious attack of hepatitis I wouldn't be able to work for a long time and even afterwards I would probably have only half the energy I used to have for years to come. My physical reserves were exhausted and it would take a long time before my defensive systems were back to normal. I try to tell myself now it's just the change in my lifestyle and try to suppress the memory of just how sick I had been back then.

Back home Napirai is waiting for me as impatiently as ever and as usual is ripping my blouse open as soon as I come through the door. I still have a lot of milk and my breasts are rather swollen which was making me uncomfortable all day at work. With a heavy heart I make up my mind that over the next few days I'm going to have to stop breastfeeding. My mother reassures me that everything's been fine. Napirai just had a little cry after her midday nap because she couldn't

have her breast milk. She's never been used to a bottle or a dummy and it seems madness to me to start her with either now. My conscience starts to nag me for a bit now because I'm not used to Napirai crying unless anyone has actually physically hurt her. In Kenya you hardly ever hear children crying or throwing tantrums the way I've started noticing here.

I really enjoy my first week getting to know the job. I'm dealing with all sorts of different people and my self-confidence is growing daily as if I was the only one who had ever found it lacking. For the first time since I've come back from Africa I've noticed people actually reacting to me as a woman. For so long now I've considered myself only to be a mother. But now when I go out for lunch in the nearby restaurant I find I'm getting the occasional appreciative glance. Once I found myself actually thinking about when I last had sex and I realised that I didn't even know. Sexuality was never top of the list for my husband and me. I got a real erotic charge from him but from early on I had to realise that the Samburus neither kissed nor caressed one another. As far as they are concerned sex isn't a game, just a means of propagation and male gratification. They have no concept of a female orgasm, not least because they indulge in the gruesome practice of clitoral amputation, the so-called female circumcision. This horrid mutilation of the female genitalia is something I will never understand. Even Lketinga found it hard to explain why they do it to their women. I loved my husband and was for a long time just so happy to be living with him that the brief duration of the sexual act didn't bother me.

Looking back at the men in the restaurant I can't bring myself to imagine having a relationship again or even just sex. After more than five years just the thought of going out with a white man again frightens me. It's something that stretches even my dormant fantasies. Or is it just that I'm not in love and have more important things to think about? Nonetheless I realise that the unaccustomed attention is good for my morale and I can enjoy it from a safe distance over lunchtime, as long as it doesn't become a nuisance.

* * *

It almost breaks my heart the first time I have to leave Napirai with her childminder for the day. The corner of her mouth turns down and her dark eyes fill up with tears as she holds out her arms towards me and calls ‘Mamaaaaa!’ The childminder takes Napirai in her arms and tries to calm her down, stroking her hair. She's going to be fine here I tell myself but it's still with a heavy heart that I head off to

work. It's not until I get to the shop that a new task takes my mind off her. Today I've got to start arranging meetings with potential customers. It's not easy getting through to the right people and getting them interested but by evening I've managed to fix up a few dates. Immediately I finish work I drive to the childminder's and charge up the three floors of stairs in my high heels. Napirai and the childminder open the door together and I can see by the smears on her face that she's already had her supper. She doesn't even make a grab to pull up my jumper but instead takes my hand and, chattering away, drags me into the room where the two children have been playing together. I feel a huge weight lifted from my shoulders when I see how happy and at ease she is. When we get back to my mother's she throws her arms around her too, as it's the first time she's not seen her for so long.

My mother hands me two letters from Kenya. 'Oh, two at once!' I say, looking at them, and assume the second is from Sophia. In the first, James tells us how pleased he is that we can stay in Switzerland, that they all prayed for us and obviously it worked. He also thanks me on his mother's behalf for the money she's now got via the mission. It's a nice letter and I'm pleased everything's going well. The second letter, written three weeks ago according to the postmark, turns out to be from Lketinga. I'm surprised as it's the first sign of life from him since we spoke on the phone nearly six months ago.

> Dear Corinne Leparimorijo,
>
> Jambo! How are you, my wife? I hope you're OK. I'm OK but I miss you and our daughter. I hope you heard my car got burnt out but I don't know how it happened. One whole side was ruined. I have most problems with the shop, where I'm still working. Since you left in October we haven't done any business. I didn't pay the rent, just half for February, 5,000 Kenyan shillings. I'm waiting now to pay 21,000 Ksh in May. But the Gulf crisis means there's no business.
>
> Everybody has gone away. The Indian shop is closed. Only Doctor Kulumba and the Chinese restaurant are still here. I have sold the car now and bought a little Toyota saloon. I got 80,000 Ksh for the car, but the person who bought it from me didn't pay all the money, just 67,000 Ksh. So I hope you won't have forgotten me. Please send me money to pay the rent for the shop. I'm working as a taxi driver now for the few tourists still here. I hope you're getting some letters from my brother. Are you?
>
> We have a lot of rain in Mombasa. It's wintertime here now. Best wishes from the Kamau-Masai dancers. They all miss you and Napirai. They still call me Papa Napirai. That

makes me think a lot about my daughter. If you aren't coming back please tell me so I can send my daughter her clothes and dolls. Tell me what you are doing. Have you got a job or are you living at home with your mama?

I didn't want Priscilla to write for me because she doesn't write what I saw, so I got a friend to help me with this letter.

Lots of love to my daughter. I miss her and her love for me. I miss both of you.

Best wishes to all your family,

Lketinga Leparimorijo

My initial reaction to his letter is pure anger. I have no idea why he's asking me for money after I left him with everything I owned. Six months ago he was stinking rich in Kenyan terms. On the other hand I realise he can't run the shop on his own. I read the letter again and this time it just makes me sad. I see that he really does miss us and needs us too. Images of the past, of the days we wandered through the bush happily, all come flooding back to me. I can see Lketinga standing there proudly telling me the names of all the bushes and roots, the time he tenderly washed my back down by the river, shielding me from anyone who might be watching, rubbing soap into my hair with the patience of an angel and then using a tin can to gently rinse it with a trickle of water from the parched river. The way he looked after me, making food when I was weak and sick or beaming at me even at the worst moments saying, *'No problem my wife!'* I find only the positive memories coming back to me, putting all the awful experiences later in the shade. But if I use my brain I realise that I can never go back. I would be throwing my life away.

One thing is certain: I'm not going to help him, not least because I can't. I have no more money. I'm fascinated to hear what Madeleine's going to tell me when she gets back from her holiday.

* * *

On Sunday evening she calls me to say she's got good news and bad news. She had a great holiday and is sorry it's over. 'Did you give Lketinga my letter?' I interrupt her to ask. 'No, I called at the shop twice but each time it was closed. In fact the whole area was pretty dead and the shop only had a few articles of stock in the window. To be quite honest, I don't think there's ever anybody working there.' It's a real blow to hear that everything I worked so hard to build up out there has been run down. She didn't see Sophia either but heard that

she had gone way. I'm disappointed she has nothing more to tell me, but at least now I know there's no point in spending any more money on the shop.

But now she tells me the good news, which actually is about my new life: she's heard that there's a small two-bedroom flat about to become free in the block opposite hers and almost certainly hasn't been allocated yet. I'm electrified by the possibility of getting a flat in my ideal part of town and immediately begin a long letter to the housing association putting my case, and asking them to give Napirai and me a chance. Two days later I follow it up with a phone call. The woman dealing with the flats remembers my letter well but says there is a long waiting list. I tell her again how badly we need somewhere of our own and she tells me in a friendly voice that she'll sleep on it and let me know tomorrow. Once again I pray to heaven for help. My mother gets excited too and says, 'Let's drive out there right away. After all I'd like to see what I'm praying for.'

We both fall in love with the gardens. Napirai could play on the lawn and in the summer we could put a paddling pool out for her. Already my mother and I are making plans. It would be so good if I can only get this flat.

The next day I have to start going out and visiting potential customers, turning up at various firms with my two cases full of scarves and ties. Unfortunately I don't get any orders straight away as they all say they have to take a look at their promotional budgets first, and I should call back in three or four weeks time. Nearly all of them buy something for themselves however, but that is hardly the turnover I need to get a decent commission. But there you have it, it's my first day on this aspect of the job and it's obvious I'm gong to have to work to build up a client base.

That evening we sit there nervously over supper waiting for a call from the housing association. The time crawls by and I've almost given up hope when, just before ten p.m., the telephone finally rings. And indeed it is the woman from the housing association. She apologies for the delay in getting back to us and then asks if I've already found myself a job and what it is. I'm immediately on the ball and tell her everything she wants to know. On the other end of the line I hear a deep sigh of relief and the woman says, 'That's good because in your case I'm going to make an exception. Ever since I read your letter I haven't been able to get you and your daughter out of my head. I'll send out a contract to you but I can't say immediately when you'll be able to move in because the heirs of the last tenant who has just died still need to sort things out.' I thank her with tears in my eyes, scarcely able to believe my luck. Even my mother needs some time for it to sink in: 'You really are a lucky duck,' she says at last.

‘Congratulations, but now you're going to have a lot of outgoings.’ I tell her I only need the barest minimum to get by. Immediately I call Madeleine to share my delight that we'll soon be neighbors. Moving in is hardly going to take a lot of effort, as I don't have any furniture yet.

* * *

A few days later I get a call from a man I don't know who turns out to be the son of the previous tenant. He's heard my story from the housing association and has a suggestion to make to me. ‘I've heard you're about to move in to my late mother's apartment and they tell me you don't have much stuff because you've just returned from living abroad. What I'd like to propose is that you take a look at what there is in the flat and take whatever you like. I'll have the rest taken to the tip. All you have to do in return is take responsibility for cleaning the place out before you move in. How does that sound to you?’

I'm really touched and overcome by his gesture, thank him and arrange a date to come and take a look. I'm beginning to think my luck is supernatural. My mother comes along with me to give me some advice on what to keep. As soon as I walk into the flat I'm really taken with it and know we're going to be happy here. After living in huts in Kenya, the large, bright living room, open-plan kitchen and little bathroom feel like a palace. The furniture is a bit old-fashioned but I don't mind that; at least it all seems clean and well looked after, and a lick of paint here and there will work wonders. The kitchen is completely kitted out from gold-rimmed porcelain plates to frying pans and there are even sheets and towels in the cupboard in the hallway. I soon realise I could move in straight away without needing almost anything else at all. All we'd have to bring is our clothes. All this without spending a single franc. Once again I thank God for all the luck I've had in the last month.

As I'm wandering around the rooms admiring everything I can't help feeling it's as if I'm getting something back: I had a small flat just like this before I went off to Kenya. As I was totally convinced I would never be coming back I handed over the lease on the flat and all its contents to a student for just the price of my plane ticket. He could hardly believe his luck then either. I can still see the face on the young lad about to start at the technical college standing there with his mother asking me in astonishment if I really didn't want to take any of it. ‘Nope, where I'm headed I won't need any of this stuff,’ I said, with a laugh.

So in a way today this all feels like a ‘present in return’. I thank the nice chap very much and tell him how much easier his kind

gesture will make my life. He seems almost embarrassed and says goodbye quickly. A doorway across the landing opens and I introduce myself to my new neighbor and tell her how pleased I am to be moving in. Two little girls stick their heads out from behind her and I realise that this is going to be just paradise for Napirai too.

* * *

The week at work flashes by and I chalk up my first small-scale and large-scale successes. The last night we spend in my mother's house I'm so excited I can hardly sleep. Grateful as I am to her for putting us up, I'm looking forward to my independence. At long last Napirai and I will have a flat of our own where I can arrange things my own way. As all this is going through my head late at night I realise I've been in this position before. When Lketinga and I spent our last night in his Mama's cramped little hut in Barsaloi, where we had lived for a year, I couldn't get to sleep either because I was so excited at moving out into a big new *manyatta* of our own. I remember how proud I was fitting out our new home with our few possessions.

I'm also reminded of a strange event that happened then. When I was putting my clothes away I found a little gray snake on the cow pat wall. In shock I instinctively grabbed a stone from the hearth and killed it. When my mother-in-law found out the next day she didn't seem very happy about it. Lketinga explained to me that if a young woman finds a baby snake on moving into her first *manyatta* it means she must be pregnant, so on no account should you kill the snake. I was really upset about having made such a mistake even though I was certain that there was no way it was an omen that I was pregnant. There's no way I wouldn't already have known. But as it turned out I found out a couple of weeks later that indeed I must already have been pregnant at the time. ‘At least there's no chance of finding a snake tomorrow,’ I tell myself as I finally drift off to sleep.

The next day we pack up our few possessions and move in. We're hardly carrying more than my nomadic mother-in-law. Except that we're using a car rather than the donkey she packs her few worldly goods on to: first the big, reusable branches from the *manyatta* are dismantled and strapped to the sides of the donkey so that the rolled-up cowhides and the homemade sisal mats for the ceiling can fit between them. Then she hangs her pots, pans, cups and gourds around them, and everything's ready for the long day's trek through the bush.

Our move in contrast only takes an hour. My mother's given me a big green pot plant to give the room a bit of life, and a big basket full of groceries. Napirai goes around looking at all these new things not

sure whether she ought to be pleased or not. After we unpack I take her down to the playground where there's a slide next to the sand pit. There are children of all ages playing there and they watch us uncertainly whispering or giggling to one another. People here appear unused to people of a different color as they all stare at Napirai. Two children even run away and I spot them a little later standing with their mothers out on their balconies. I try to get at least a few names from the rest of this tribe of children but it's only when Madeleine turns up a little later and tells them who we are that things perk up a bit.

That evening I make a pasta dish in our new flat. Madeleine and her son are coming round for a bit of a house-warming. It's my first to chance to cook in a European kitchen again as my mother wouldn't let anyone else into hers. I get pleasure from simply turning the knob for the right hotplate and turning a tap to fill a pan of water. Everything works well and it's all really fast. Just doing these simple chores in our *manyatta* would take up to two hours. First I had to go down to the river and use a tin can to fill a canister with water and bring it home. Then I had to go and gather firewood and carefully build a fire which was not easy as we had no newspaper to burn and I had to hope I'd find a glowing ember in the hearth which I could blow on and bring back to life. By the time I'd finally got it lit the hut would be filled with smoke bringing tears to my eyes and making it hard to breathe.

And now here I am in my own Swiss apartment where I can just turn two knobs and there's the pot cooking on the hob. Time and time again I keep seeing even the tiniest things as miraculous and can only feel grateful that I've seen life from the other side. Madeleine brings round a bottle of red wine and now we can properly celebrate. We're both amazed that that first meeting of the single mothers' group has changed our lives. Tomorrow is the next meeting of the group and I'm interested to see if any of the others have had such positive results.

* * *

The group's founders are delighted things have gone so well for us and say, 'That's exactly the sort of thing we were hoping to achieve. All of us have our own contacts and can possibly help someone else. That's the way it's supposed to work.'

I get talking to a woman who's new to the group and I am amazed by her story. She lives on her own bringing up three children in an ancient house in a village of just fifty inhabitants, twelve hundred meters high up in the mountains. She has to do everything herself: chop wood, build a fire in an ancient wood-fired oven to heat the

house and provide hot water, and even do her own repairs to the building. Going shopping means a two-hour trek on foot and she has to carry everything back up the mountain in a rucksack. Every winter she has to shovel colossal amounts of snow. Since she divorced a few years ago she's hardly been out to meet people. I'm really struck to find a young woman living such a cut-off, old-fashioned existence of her own free will. I want to see for myself how she manages and arrange to go and visit her the next weekend.

Then I get into conversation with a pretty woman with two daughters who's also not long back from abroad and is living with her parents again after the collapse of her marriage. Her two girls get on well with Napirai so we too arrange to meet up one weekend. The Sunday simply flies by and we all head off again our own separate ways. One thing I've learned today is that I have the right to an income supplement from my employer for having a child, so I've decided to tell my boss about Napirai whenever I get a moment that seems suitable.

* * *

By the end of my second month on the road for work I'm struck by a brilliant idea. Turnover isn't growing very fast primarily because big companies seldom place a firm order straight away. But as it's been my experience that almost everyone I approach buys something for himself, I should offer our products directly to the staff of big companies like banks and insurance firms. My boss says I might as well give it a go and he'll certainly support the idea if I get some sales.

It turns out to be a success. Now I'm making appointments for a preliminary showing to arrange a day when I can come and sell openly. Before long I'm doing my first sales day in a bank and it works a treat. The male employees immediately buy several designer ties and usually also scarves or shawls for their wives. However, these sales appointments are nearly always after work which means I have to work later. On the other hand those who turn up are always in a better mood because it's the end of their working day. The result is that by the end of the month turnover has risen substantially and so has my income.

* * *

By now, however, we're into the height of summer and I want to get home as early as possible to be able to take my daughter to play

outside. We've settled in to our new flat really well. The neighbour's children have really taken to Napirai and the children are forever charging backwards and forwards between the two flats. Sometimes I've got all the children, then Napirai will disappear into their flat for hours on end. Things are almost as hectic as they were among the children back in Kenya and both of us really enjoy it. On fine evenings Madeleine conies over and we natter to one another late into the night. Napirai in any case sleeps better when she can hear the sound of human voices. She can drop off to sleep no matter how noisy it is but finds it difficult when things are totally silent. I use the extra money I've earned to buy a barbecue and a paddling pool for Napirai, and now half the children in the whole area seem to come round to see us, which makes for great fun.

When it rains we pull on our Wellington boots and go off into the nearby forest. I adore inhaling the smell of the damp earth and seeing the greenery of the meadows and trees. When the weather is fine we build a camp fire in the forest and grill sausages. All the children love that. I love the smell of the smoke too as it reminds me of my life back in the *manyattas* in Kenya. Every time it takes me back to all those experiences around the family hearth.

Sometimes I grill food at home too on the new barbecue. There's always something going on at the weekends. Either we go swimming in a lake with Madeleine or some of the other mothers from the group and take a picnic or we head up into the mountains for a little bit of a hike. It's always fun for everyone because there are nearly always several mothers together and it's a distraction from their day-to-day problems. I haven't enjoyed a summer so much in years. Things have all worked out for the best so quickly. The only bitter taste in my mouth is that I don't know how Lketinga is getting on as James has heard no more from him since he gave up the shop.

The Bureaucratic Hurdles

At the beginning of September my summer euphoria evaporates in a flash. I had completely forgotten my application for family social security registration. Reading the relevant regulations now is like having the rug pulled from beneath my feet. According to German law I'm still married which means Napirai has to take her father's surname unless we've decided otherwise together. But the name will not be legally recognized unless we can present a valid identity card or social security documents. Apart from anything else they require my husband's birth certificate. And how, in the name of God, am I supposed to conjure up a birth certificate when he's never even had one. I'm given a form on which I'm supposed to answer a thousand and one questions about Lketinga's parents. How on earth am I supposed to gather all this information about a husband whose whereabouts I don't even know?

My head's spinning so much with all this I start to feel unwell. There is not the slightest possibility that Lketinga would ever consent to Napirai changing her surname to mine. And I've only got my residence permit for Switzerland on the basis of us both having the same nationality and surname. I start to panic that somebody might try to take Napirai away from me. Is our whole wonderful new world about to fall apart just because of a couple of stupid paragraphs in some bureaucratic paperwork? Or is Lketinga, of no fixed abode and at least ten thousand kilometers away, to become Napirai's legal guardian?

I keep going through all the questions over and over again but I've still got no idea how I'm ever going to answer them. What I'd like to do is throw them all in the bin. But sooner or later Napirai is going to need an identity card and for that she's going to need a legally recognized birth certificate.

That means getting written confirmation from Kenya, and how on earth am I going to do that? Gradually I start despairing over it all and without the slightest clue what I'm supposed to do I call my mother. She does her best to reassure me but actually hasn't any more of a clue than I have.

None of my new friends and acquaintances can help either so I call the German consulate in Zurich to make an appointment to go and talk it over. The gentleman there is very courteous and helpful but doesn't know what he can do for me. Laws are laws. I should try to find out more about Lketinga's family from his brother and then he'll see what he can do with the information I've provided and what else I might need.

I leave the consulate exhausted and dripping sweat, aware only that it's all going to be very difficult. I think of my much-loved Kenyan relatives and their simple primitive lifestyle. How can I possibly explain to people like them that in our 'civilized' world we need all this? These are people who have no idea of their own birthdays, much less of why anyone would celebrate such a thing, and I'm supposed to find out details of the dead. It all strikes me as absurd.

But I can't see any other solution so I write James a long letter, asking him to answer as many of the questions as he can and if possible to reply using a typewriter and get the mission to authenticate his letter. I tell him how sorry I am to cause so much fuss but that it's very important for Napirai and me. I send off the letter with not much hope, knowing that it's bound to be at least two or three months before I even get an answer because James is off at school now and won't be back home until Christmas. The consulate here is going to send Napirai's birth certificate and our wedding certificate back to Kenya to have them authenticated, and that's going to take forever too.

Despite all this chaos, we gradually get back to our daily routine and I try not to think about what could happen. I have to believe this problem too will somehow get resolved.

* * *

In the weeks before Christmas my sales to big company staff members really take off as the products make such good presents. My boss is very happy with me and leases me a nice new car, as my old Ford keeps breaking down in town and I've been late for meetings as a result. Every time I have a breakdown, however, I'm amazed how quick and easy it is to get going again. Either another motorist stops to help or you call a rescue service which is there within minutes. It was rather different in Kenya! We used to stand out there in the bush for hours, if not days, waiting in vain for someone who could help to come along. Eventually I had to learn how to do a few basic repairs myself and change the tyres which were forever getting punctures. The only time the natives were able to help was when the Land Rover got stuck in mud or sand and they could fetch wood to place underneath it to give the tyres something to grip on to.

I'm feeling very proud of myself now driving to work in my new car. It's snowed overnight and the streets are full of slush, but I'm not worried about driving because my boss reassured me that the car's all-weather tyres are more than adequate. Even so I'm driving slowly and cautiously. Then all of a sudden on a right-hand bend I lose control of

the vehicle and it slithers straight ahead on the slushy snow only coming to a halt when it thuds into a parked car. I'm in shock. I've never had an accident in my life until now. And that's with driving over some of the most insane roads in Kenya that almost nobody else dared drive on. I can't understand what happened. I thought I was steering properly into the bend. My beautiful brand-new car is badly damaged on the right-hand wing and the parked car I've crashed into is no better. Doors and windows up and down the street are opening now and within seconds there's a distraught woman staring at her new, now near demolished, car.

I'm absolutely mortified and can't help thinking my boss is going to chew my head off. When the husband of the woman whose car it is appears, he turns out — irony of ironies — to be a car bodywork repairer, and he immediately notices that I haven't got winter tyres. I can't believe what he's telling me and end up nearly hysterical. He then starts trying to calm both of us down and says, 'It's not all as bad as it looks.' Even my boss doesn't seem too worked up when I ring to tell him the news and says he'll send for a tow-truck. And that's the end of my first week with a brand-new car. But I get a replacement vehicle until mine can be repaired and my boss tells me the insurance will pick up the tab for the rest. That's how easy things are here.

* * *

Organizing my sales meetings and going along to show off my goods gets me into contact with more and more people, and ever more frequently some man or other asks me out for dinner or a drink. Up until now I've always made my excuses, but for the first time I've met someone I like and I accept. We make a dinner date and so I find myself going out with a man for the first time since my return from Kenya. Napirai is spending the night with my mother.

Already over dinner, when we're getting to know one another, I realise my previous life has its drawbacks. 'Oh, you already have a child?' is his first comment, and his tone of voice says it all, and before long the evening's already over.

Another time I went out with someone, my story was greeted with, 'I see, you prefer black men?' Even when I tell him that I've only gone out with one black man, my ex-husband, the comment still leaves a funny taste in the air. One man even asked me: 'Have you had an Aids test yet?' Each time something like that happens I'm brought straight down to earth with a bump with the result that all these 'affairs' end before they've even begun.

Before long I can't be bothered to send my daughter off to spend

the night elsewhere just to go out for a meal and some disagreeable conversation. It's more fun cooking for some of my girlfriends and having a bit of a party at home. Or every now and then I meet up with some of my old colleagues from Rapperswil if there's live music in a restaurant there. Then I can take Napirai along too and she really enjoys that. She loves being in a big group of people and when there's a band playing she goes and stands at the front right next to them and dances along, which amuses everybody. Sometimes she just goes around from table to table looking at people. When she gets back to our table, she's usually got some sort of little present. I have to laugh although sometimes I wonder if it's her natural curiosity and good mood that wins over people or the color of her skin.

One night when we're sitting peacefully in a local spot at around eleven o'clock in the evening, I hear someone say, ‘A child ought to be in bed at this time.’ Oh yes, I think to myself, and you mean her mother ought to be back home along with her. The fact is that my daughter enjoys being out with me, listening to the music and enjoying each other's company, and in any case it's a weekend and we can sleep in. In warm climates people are used to taking their children out with them and it's a well-known fact that everyone's jollier. I pay no attention to them and the two of us stay on until I notice that she really is tired. Then we drive back home happily.

I mention this experience at one of our next group meetings and immediately everyone starts talking about their experiences. A lot of single mothers lack self-confidence and don't go out to public places; they stay indoors until they go mad. Well I'm not going to be one of them; I'm going to bring my daughter up my own way.

* * *

Once again Christmas is on its way and there's deep snow everywhere. Some of the others in our little housing estate ask me if I want to bring Napirai out to one of the forest huts for a St Nicholas's day party. They're going to have someone dressed as St Nicholas there with his donkey and all that goes with it. Everyone's contributing something. I say yes please, and can't wait to see how Napirai will react to it all.

Ten of us adults turn up with our children at the hut which is all done up with Christmas decorations. There are nuts, mandarin oranges, candles and wine. We've been there about an hour when there's the tinkle of bells outside and a hammering on the door. All the children jump excitedly and run to their parents. Napirai just stands there staring at me in surprise and then back at the door, which opens

to reveal two little children dressed as St Nicholas, all in red, along with their traditional helpers, Farmhand Ruprecht all in black, and old brown Schmutzli with his stick. For a second or two it all goes silent and then we grown-ups ask the pair of St Nicholases in and the children start laughing, although a few still hide behind their parents. Napirai is still puzzled and asks me: 'Mama, who is it?' I explain all the legend and tradition to her in a jokey way and then we listen as the St Nicholases make their little speeches for each child before they go over to collect their little sacks of goodies. But Napirai only wants to go over to the man in black. She's not remotely interested in the children dressed in the red costumes. Instead she goes up to Farmhand Ruprecht and starts pulling at his black beard. It looks so funny that everybody breaks out in laughter. Most of the children avoid this sinister figure but Napirai is fascinated by him. We're in tears of laughter. I realise it must have something to do with Africa, a memory of her African origins and an instinctive trust in dark people.

It reminds me of a funny thing that happened about six months earlier when we were out shopping. We were going up an escalator when we came across a black man going down the one opposite. Napirai, who was sitting in the shopping trolley, pointed a finger at him and called out 'Papa!' He smiled over at us but my face was bright red. And now here she is hanging on to Farmhand Ruprecht. I'm certain she'll want to visit her father when she grows up.

Eventually our little Christmas party comes to an end and we clear everything up. On the way home Napirai is very proud to be carrying her little sack filled with nuts, chocolate and gingerbread.

A few days later I get a letter from James telling me things are more or less OK, except that they haven't had any rain for nearly a year and both people and animals are going hungry. In fact the drought is so bad some have already died. The cows are dying because the grass isn't growing any more which means there's no more milk and that's one of the main subsistence foods for the people. Thanks to the financial help my brother Marc and I are providing, his family are doing better than most. He thanks us effusively once again and sends the very best wishes from the whole family. But he doesn't refer to the questions I asked for my social security application and so I have no idea whether our letters crossed or mine has even got lost altogether. He still hasn't heard from Lketinga but doesn't want to go back down to Mombasa. He'll let me know if he hears anything. He's going to be home for two months over Christmas and there's going to be another big ceremony for which he has to buy a cow, but he has no money and asks me to help him out.

We're spending Christmas with my mother and Hanspeter, and once again there's a huge pile of presents for my daughter which gives

me a bad conscience in the light of the hunger and drought on the other side of the world.

The chair of our single mothers' group has invited us all round to her place for New Year's Eve. Once again we all contribute something: salads, pizza, cakes, meat, wine or champagne. In the end there are thirteen of us mothers and twice as many children of all ages. We stuff ourselves at our magnificent buffet and end up dancing around her beautifully-decorated flat. By ten p.m. we've got so much food left over we wonder what to do with it all. Then someone has the bright idea of ringing up a radio station and getting them to tell people. After several fruitless attempts we finally get through and a message goes out on the airwaves saying there are thirteen women sitting there with a pile of food and inviting anyone to turn up as long as they bring a bit of festive spirit to the occasion. We don't mention the children. After that the phone doesn't stop ringing with either calls from single men or even whole groups of men. We give our address to the ones who sound nicest but after ten minutes we stop even taking calls or the flat will be heaving all night long. Before long the first visitors are at the door ringing the bell. The older children go and open it and the visitors apologies, saying they must be at the wrong place. But the children have been well trained and say, 'No, no, come in, our mothers are all dancing or sitting in the living room.'

That's how we greet all of them. Some of them turn round on the spot and leave but a few are simply amazed and stay despite the children. By midnight there are eight men sitting around patiently allowing the children to put paper hats and false noses on them, things that have come out of crackers we had earlier. By two a.m. however, even the liveliest children are dead beat and so we bring our fun but crazy New Year's party to a close.

Back home I put Napirai, who's already asleep, to bed and sit there thinking back over my past year. So many things have changed but I'm feeling happy. I have a nice two-bedroom flat which even a year on I still consider enormous compared to the places I used to live in. Even today I still stare into the fridge for ages before I take out something to eat, just out of appreciation and awe. We've done it, and I give thanks to God for everything I've overcome in the past year, and wonder what awaits me in the year to come: 1992.

* * *

Right at the beginning of the new year I have an appointment with my family doctor to get my blood and liver functions tested. The doctor who knows my story from my first visit to him is surprised how

well I've recovered. I may be still very thin but I no longer look malnourished. The blood tests show up very few malaria antibodies which is unusual given how often I've suffered from the serious tropical disease. Even my liver function tests amaze the doctor who says he can more or less classify me as healthy. I tell him I haven't done anything in particular to deal with my illness since I've been back in Switzerland but began to feel well again really quite quickly. 'Well it would seem your attitude has served you well because I've never seen anyone recover so quickly,' he says, and happily gives me a clean bill of health.

January is cold and wet. Business isn't as good as it was before Christmas. People are dismissive and bad-tempered. Even my boss grumbles that turnover could be better. I'm of the opinion, however, that January is a bleak period and expectations are simply too high. I know that from my earlier experience running a shop, and he ought to know it too if he's been in the business for more than forty years as he made a proud point of telling me. At the moment, however, I just have to be thankful for every order. Things will get better in February.

Our only big excitement is the village carnival. It's the first time Napirai has been old enough to join in and she's going dressed as a witch. She heads off with one of her little girlfriends delighted by all the crazy goings-on. In the meantime she's been getting on really well with the childminder's family, so well in fact that sometimes she doesn't want to come home when I turn up, she's so engrossed in playing with the other children. Obviously I found that a bit hurtful the first time it happened but on the other hand I'm more than delighted she's fitting in so well.

* * *

Finally I get the typewritten letter from Barsaloi and am amazed to see that James has managed it. He says the whole family is delighted and his mother was even moved to tears when she learned that their family history was going to be recorded in the Swiss archives. I'd been prepared for anything but that, and end up in tears myself at the thought of my poor mother-in-law whom I really miss. They've answered nearly all the questions and got an official stamp from the mission. They're sorry only that they haven't got a birth certificate for Lketinga and nobody can say for sure what his date of birth was. But they have even provided details of his late father. I'm so grateful to my mother-in-law for understanding and taking all this trouble.

But I'm still not over-optimistic as I go to the German consulate

and hand over the letter to the man there. Once again we have to fill out endless forms. Anything that isn't sufficiently clarified in the letter I have to swear to on oath. Once again we send it all off to Berlin and go back to waiting. The one thing they make clear to me is that this is definitely not the last time I'll have to visit the consulate.

* * *

As far as work goes there isn't a bank or insurance company in Zurich I haven't visited. In Basel I even managed to organise an appointment with the chemical company Sandoz in the morning and Hoffmann La Roche in the afternoon. I'd like to see someone else manage that, I tell myself rather proudly. In mid-March I go back to a bank where I've arranged to call regularly every three months. Their buyer who deals with such things has bought a stack of expensive designer silk squares. But when I go into the building and ask for her, she comes out and looks at me in surprise: Didn't you know I went into your shop three weeks ago to place my order? I suddenly needed a few things urgently and couldn't get through to you on the phone. They said I might as well place my order there and then in the shop so I did and won't need anything else for several months now.'

I'm astonished because I knew nothing about this. But I say nothing, take my leave of her with good grace and walk out of the bank. Back home I check my books and find no record of any commission for the order, so the next day I call my boss and ask what's going on. At first he tries to avoid the question but then he tells me the order simply had nothing to do with me because the lady in question came into the shop to place it and didn't do it through me. I don't agree: I tell him she's my customer. I won her trade in the first place and therefore I should be entitled to commission on all her follow-up orders. That commission after all is part of my wages. He refuses to agree and I quickly come to realise that the same thing has almost certainly happened before.

We end up in a proper slanging match. I can't believe he doesn't see my point of view and on the contrary is trying to take my customers away from me. I've sometimes worked until late at night building up a customer base selling to company staff and now he stabs me in the back. I'm horribly disappointed and feel as if I'm being used. I can't take being treated like this and react accordingly: I resign on the spot. 'You just go ahead and do that then,' he replies with an ironic laugh and hangs up on me.

After a few minutes thinking about what I've just done I realise that he obviously wanted to get rid of me. Now that I've built up a

customer base for him he'd rather save my salary. I feel so angry and let down that I feel tears welling up inside me. I can forgive anything but not being treated unfairly. But there I am, just eight months after making a success of my first job again, writing a letter of resignation. But I'm convinced I'll find something else. He'll have to write me a reference and he'll regret it if it's not a good one. A whole series of companies whose staff I've sold to wrote in to thank me for my personal efforts and to say how well-organized everything was.

A week later I turn in my car and my sample stock but only after making sure that I'm paid whatever salary is outstanding. I also want to see the reference he's written first. All of that, however, goes without a hitch and we part with the minimal amount of words. Even though I've enjoyed this first job up until now I'm still glad to have made the right decision. It's fairly obvious that if things had gone on longer it could all have got worse.

* * *

Now, however, I no longer have a car or a job, just a flat for which I need money to pay the rent. That evening I drive over to Rapperswil. I need to think things over, but also a bit of distraction. Napirai is sleeping over at the girl-next-door's for the first time and is really excited about that.

In the course of the evening I bump into a few old friends and tell them I've quit my job. One of them says he knows another firm that trades in promotional gifts and he'll ask them if there's anything going. A few days later I'm invited in to meet the relevant people. Their offer is hardly overwhelming but it's better than nothing and maybe I can build it up into something. They deal in all sorts of promotional goods: printed cigarette lighters, ballpoint pens, wallets, etc. They see any firm as a potential customer. But here again it would mean starting from scratch as they don't have any customer base in my area.

A week later I start my new job, but it's almost impossible to fix up any meetings. As a result I end up trawling around restaurants, offices, small businesses with a car laden down with stuff. Our prices however are cheap and people end up giving me loads of orders there and then on the spot. After two to three months the word has got around that the stuff I'm selling is decent quality and good value. As a result people recommend me to others and before long I'm getting potential customers calling me.

It's much easier to get to know the staff in this sort of work and when I turn up at one small firm during their morning break they invite me in for coffee while they take a look at my samples. It's a very

different selling technique to my last job but I enjoy it, particularly getting to know lots of people.

* * *

By now my circle of friends and acquaintances has got much wider. In particular I've become friendly with a large group of women so it's not hard to find a few people to go out with of an evening. What I like most of all is going dancing.

I notice people sitting or standing close together in bars scarcely able to hear one another speak over the loud music and I can't help thinking they're all waiting for something. It's as if there's an invisible wall between them and me. I get the impression I'm there but not part of it. I can't explain it even to myself as I meet lots of people and even end up flirting mildly with one or two of them. But it all somehow seems unreal, superficial to me. On the other hand I can't get over how much the music and the fashion have changed.

When I think back to the Bush-disco I put on a couple of times in Barsaloi, I have to almost laugh at the comparison. There we made do with the rear room of our shop, after we'd cleared the floor of maize sacks. The only music came from a transistor radio wired up to the battery of an old Land Rover. We had beer, coke and grilled goat meat. Everybody, young and old, piled in to this improvised disco, most of them attending something of the sort for the very first time. They stood there, staring like big children, even the tribal elders wrapped in their woolen blankets, squatting on the floor and laughing. Only the women stayed outside, which didn't stop the men getting on with some wild dancing. They were all happy and gave off this great feeling of ‘togetherness’. Back there I didn't feel any invisible wall between me and everybody else. It was a moving experience, while here it seems more like an extension of consumerism. Even still, I go out on to the floor, let the new music take me and sometimes dance for hours.

* * *

All this time Napirai is growing up into a bright happy little girl. We have a strong relationship between us even though I've long since given up breastfeeding her. We still share the same bedroom, and indeed the same big bed.

One weekend I take her over to Biel where I used to have my wedding dress shop which I sold to a friend before moving to Africa.

On the way I wonder to myself whether or not I ought to call Marco, whom I used to live with and only dumped because of Lketinga. But as I haven't quite made my mind up by the time we get there, I park the car in the 'old town' where my shop used to be. I've long since lost touch with Mimi who took over the shop from me and she doesn't even know I've come back. I walk down the steps to the shop and notice that a few things have changed. Mimi is in the shop talking to two customers. When she looks up and sees us she bursts out in astonishment: '*Non, c'est pas vrai, Corinne*, is it really you? I don't believe it. What are you doing here?' She's still staring at me in disbelief when I rush up to her and kiss her on both cheeks.

'Oh, it's a long long story, but let's leave it for another time. First of all, you must tell me how you're doing with the shop,' I say to snap her out of it. By now of course she's also staring at Napirai. When the two customers leave the shop, we get down to telling each other our life stories of the past few years. Since taking over the shop she's met a new partner, I'm glad to hear, as before she had been on her own for ages after a divorce. Then I fill her in on my story, which even cut short takes a little longer. By the end she sympathies with me on the fact that my great love affair ended so tragically. Out of the blue she asks me if I wouldn't like to bring my daughter down to visit her and her partner in St Raphael in the south of France: they've rented a nice villa for a couple of weeks because her partner has taken on a job working on ship engines for the summer season. She's going down there in two weeks time and we'd be welcome whenever we want. 'The villa is in a wonderful location, has a big pool and lots of room for all of us. Then you could tell me all the rest of the story of your life in Kenya.'

I take up the offer immediately, as we haven't had a holiday in years, even though whenever I mention having spent four years in Kenya most people here think that must have been a holiday.

After she writes down the address for me, I ask her about Marco. Unfortunately she doesn't see the same old crowd any more but she does know that Marco's moved. I decide therefore just to give him a ring. He sounds neither surprised nor angry to hear from me so we have a longish chat on the phone, before arranging to meet in a restaurant. He's hardly changed at all. We make short work of filling in the bare bones of our lives over recent years and he tells me he's just put a broken relationship behind him too, and has finally had enough of being in a couple, he adds with a beaming smile and no trace of bitterness. After a while, however, we run out of conversation and say goodbye to one another, which is a relief to Napirai who's been getting bored.

On the way home I try to imagine going on holiday to the south

of France and suddenly recall with pleasure that a great aunt of mine on my mother's side lives in St Raphael. She comes originally from Indochina, modern Vietnam, and this will give me an opportunity finally to get to meet her.

Three weeks later we set off on the long car journey. En route we sing songs or I tell Napirai stories or play fairy tales on cassette. For the first few hundred kilometers everything goes fine but then Napirai starts to get grumpy because she doesn't want to sit in the car any more. Nothing I can do will calm her down and eventually there's nothing for it but to turn off the motorway and find a hotel somewhere. However, it's the middle of July in Italy, near the coast, and that turns out to be a virtually hopeless task. Everything's full and apart from anything else people give us funny looks. I've virtually given up and resigned myself to the pair of us spending the night in the car when we have a spot of luck at the last place we try. It's an old *pensiorte* in a side street and the room is basic and noisy.

Before Napirai and I settle down for the night I decide we might as well stretch our legs. We wander through the streets of the picturesque little town where all the old folk sit out on the streets by their front doors. Again and again I hear people saying, '*Che bella bambina! Che bella!'* Some of them are so taken with my pretty little girl that they want to touch her or stroke her hair but Napirai's having none of it and gives them all dirty looks. We go back to the *pensione* and eat our last sandwiches before falling asleep exhausted.

The next day we put the last few hundred kilometers behind us and thanks to my navigational skills, honed by my experience as a traveling saleswoman, find the villa straight away. Mimi is glad to see us. The house is enormous with a huge pool. That evening she introduces me to her partner. I'm surprised by him and pleased for her: he turns out to be a relaxed, good-natured young man who seems to anticipate Mimi's every wish. We all spend a pleasant evening together.

On our very next day however a tragedy almost occurs.

While I'm out fetching bread, something terrible happens back at the house. Without making a sound Napirai sneaks downstairs to the pool and it's only when Mimi wanders out on to the terrace and accidentally glances over that she sees the mop of her hair floating in the water. She dashes over to the pool and only just manages to pull the child out in the nick of time. When I get back some twenty minutes later, Napirai is still screaming her head off. I charge up the steps in a panic and see her bright-red face.

When Mimi, all in a fluster, starts telling me what happened my legs all but give way beneath me and tears start rolling down my face as I realise my child very nearly died. I sit there and hold her for

hours and for the next few days I refuse to let her out of my sight for even a second.

I take her down to the beach and let her play about in the sand. Walking around the village streets we come across a merry-go-round which is the first Napirai has ever seen and really delights her. But apart from that the rest of our holiday drifts past quietly, perhaps too quietly for me. I'm not used to doing nothing and having so much free time.

I keep thinking back to Kenya and my family over there and wish I knew what had become of Lketinga and what he thinks of us now, nearly two years after I left him. I know he's still alive but I don't know where he's living or what he's doing. In his last letter, James said another Samburu warrior had come back from the coast and said Lketinga was living here and there, still had his car but had had a bad accident. Luckily he escaped with no more than a few flesh wounds to his face. The letter worried me but there was nothing I could do. But there you have it, and here I am sitting in St Raphael on holiday and bored.

The only interesting event turns out to be my meeting with my great aunt. We look up her house and without announcing ourselves in advance simply turn up on the doorstep. She's both astonished and delighted to see us. She's a small, dainty, elderly lady with very obvious Asian origins. She tells us stories about the exciting life she led before the war. Her family was very wealthy and employed more than eighty servants, which is something I can hardly imagine. As a child she had her feet bound to keep them small which would make her more eligible for marriage. Later, when she got to know my grandfather's brother and ended up fleeing to France with him, she needed a whole string of operations before she could even walk properly without pain. I've never heard of such a thing and I'm horrified by it, although up to a point it reminds me of the horrible genital mutilation still practiced by the Samburu and other African tribes. Why is it that all over the world girls are mistreated in some way or other, I ask myself sadly.

Then she tells us more fascinating stories from her full life and we sit there listening, absorbed in her tales. As we leave I think how glad I am to have met this interesting old lady. Who knows if I'll ever see her again.

Back home I tell my mother about the near-fatal accident at the pool, to make sure she never lets Napirai out of her sight if she takes her to the swimming pool. But that year in fact my mother teaches her to swim properly without using any inflatable aids, and that's definitely the best way to stop any accident of that sort.

* * *

We settle back into our daily routine. I go to work during the day leaving Napirai with my mother or the childminder's family. After our holiday together I find it hard being apart from my child again. But sales are going well and that keeps me busy and happy in my work. My pay is enough to see me by and some months I even have a few hundred Swiss francs over to save towards my tax bill and maybe even another holiday.

On one occasion I drop in unannounced on a potential customer who laughs the minute I enter his shop. 'What, not another rep! What are you going to try to flog me? This character's already working on me,' he says, indicating a pleasant-looking man next to him. I keep relaxed and say hello to both of them, noting that at least we're not trying to sell the same sort of goods. He specializes in T-shirts with company adverts printed on them. We chat to one another and end up laying out our wares together.

As I'm leaving my 'colleague' invites me for a coffee, saying he'd like a quick chat. We go to a cafe round the corner and before long he's offering me a job, saying that if I want I could come and work for him. It's a company that makes good-quality printed and embroidered T-shirts, sweaters and shirts. There's good money to be made and a great team of people. I'm fascinated by the offer and readily accept his business card which identifies him as head of the traveling sales force. But I have to tell him I'm quite happy with my job as it is, though if anything were to change I'd get in touch.

Back home there's a letter from the German consulate waiting for me. I open it nervously, all too well aware that my social security status has still to be resolved. But when I read the two-page letter inside I'm over the moon again. It appears the details from Kenya were sufficient and what I'm holding is a copy of my new social security registration documents with Napirai included under my surname. That means first and foremost that she has definitely been accorded German nationality and therefore we'll no longer face any problems living in Switzerland. At last I feel sure I've cleared the last hurdle and all I have to do is get on sooner or later with the divorce. However, as I'm not in any new relationship at present that is hardly the most pressing matter and can wait. I celebrate my good news by organizing a barbecue with a couple of my girlfriends and their children.

The goods news, however, is almost immediately followed by bad: Napirai's childminder tells me she is pregnant again and when she has a new baby she simply won't have the time to look after Napirai during the day, or have anywhere for her to sleep over at nights. I'm initially very sad to hear this as Napirai gets on so well

with her but I calm myself down and realise that I've still got a few months and something else is bound to turn up.

* * *

It's autumn now and easier to sell promotional material as people are stocking up on gifts to give their own customers at Christmas. For the moment at least I'm earning more money than I did in my first job and so in January 1993 I can even afford to go on a skiing holiday to France with my mother and Hanspeter. They both go every year and this year we decide to join them, so one of the presents under the Christmas tree is a first set of skis for Napirai.

We have a magnificent holiday. The sky is bright blue every day and it's so cold the snow crunches underfoot. After ten years it's a delight to be back on skis. Napirai spends the mornings at a ski school and after two days she's already using a button lift on her own even if it almost pulls her off her feet. On the fifth day we bump into the whole ski school out on the slope and I watch Napirai skiing slowly downhill, snowploughing in a line. I'm speechless with amazement at what my three-and-a-half-year-old Masai child has managed to learn, and inestimably proud of her.

* * *

As at the beginning of every new year, work slows right down. There's simply no money to be made in January or February. And the weather's miserable too. It's at this gloomy time of the year that I get an invitation from one of my girlfriends to join her and some others for dinner. She says I absolutely have to come because it's a lively group of people from all over and lots of them are absolutely bursting to hear my story. I'm curious so I agree to go along and end up having a great evening.

Everybody's talking to one another and telling interesting tales and before long I find one man paying particular attention to my story, while I find myself also paying particular attention to him. As we're leaving we swap addresses and telephone numbers and just two days later he rings me up and we arrange to go out together on a date. It's the beginning of the first relationship I've had since coming back. He's lively, works abroad a lot and doesn't seem to have any prejudices about my own previous life. We don't see each other often, but I don't have a problem with that because I don't like leaving my daughter with anyone else too often.

Sometimes I think I can sense in him a feeling of almost regret that my relationship with my daughter is so close that there's scarcely room for anyone else. At the same time Napirai doesn't seem able to get close to him. She likes him but he's just not very good with children, probably because he's never had any of his own. He's a few years older than I am, and I gradually realise, rather set in his bachelor ways. His frequent long trips abroad gradually lead to us growing apart each time and eventually after two years the relationship simply breaks down. It wasn't exactly a great love for either of us, but then again maybe it's just that I'm simply not quite ready yet for a new partnership.

Meanwhile I've found another family to look after Napirai during the day: a couple with a little girl the same age as her. At first their little one isn't exactly pleased to have to share her mother's attention with someone else but eventually the two of them become the best of friends. I'm amazed by her mother, by her patience sitting there for hours on end painting with the children, making models and telling stories, or taking them down to the garden to plant flowers. Once again it's not long before my daughter doesn't want to leave to come home when I call to pick her up.

But I want to have my child to myself for an hour or two at least each day. Often the children next door are waiting for us anyhow. Sometimes they all stay at our place and I end up sleeping on the sofa. When they're all in the bath together, it's pure chaos. Napirai's birthday parties are popular events too: we put on a big children's party each time with some dozen parents and children out on our patio. Obviously we put up lots of decorations and I organise all sorts of games. We barbecue and I get a lot of appreciative comments about my pasta salad. Whatever's going on at work, I always make sure to book Napirai's birthday off.

It's always an occasion for me to remember the fraught circumstances of her birth in the missionary hospital in Wamba. My friend Sophia, also expecting her first baby, and I caused something of a sensation for the natives because no white woman had ever given birth in the hospital before and so obviously everybody watched us with the greatest of curiosity. When my first pangs of labor started and I was taken into the birthing room, there was almost a scrum amongst the black women to watch through the open window. As it happened I was in so much pain that I was hardly in a position to notice. It was only when my little girl was finally born that I noticed Sophia charging in to congratulate me with a lit cigarette in her mouth while I was still in the obstetric chair being sewn up without anesthetic. Not exactly something women in Switzerland can imagine, and every time I repeat the story their mouths hang open in

astonishment.

Indeed I've started noticing, that almost every time I tell my story about my great love and the life that went with it, women seem to sit there entranced by every word. Sometimes when I'm in company we end up canceling a planned trip because people would rather just listen to me telling my tales about life among the Samburu.

Divorce from Lketinga

During one of the single mothers' meetings one of the participants tells us it took years for her to complete her recent divorce proceedings. I ask her how to start the process as I simply have no idea about any of this stuff. Gradually now I'm beginning to feel it's time to make a clean break and sort out my own divorce. Following advice I ring up the local magistrate and tell him my position, that I haven't seen my husband for more than three years now.

Under the circumstances and given that Lketinga lives somewhere in Kenya and we aren't in contact, there's no need for the normal meeting with both parties and the attempt at reconciliation. He'll simply send me the forms for me to till in to begin divorce proceedings. In conclusion, however, he says he has to tell me he's never come across a case like mine before and he'll have to take advice on how to proceed. Studying the forms a few days later I'm relieved to see how simple it all seems to be. On the other hand I'm surprised to see that they want to know details about my family, my brothers and sisters and my own early life. I have to list all the schools I went to and give details about my current employment situation. Then I have to fill in details about our relationship, including how, where and at what age we got to know one another. Well, I've more than enough to fill in there. When I get to the section about financial support for the child, I put a dash and write that I'm not asking for any money or support of any kind. How on earth could Lketinga send money when in fact I'm the one sending money to his family whenever I can? Then I put it all in an envelope and send it off in hope, thinking that after all there's not much to lose.

* * *

We spend our leisure time during the summer doing all sorts of things: one day Madeleine came over with a cutting from the paper advertising a bus trip to the south Tyrol in Italy with three days in a hotel with a swimming pool. We don't have very much money but the offer is good value and so we sign up. The main thing is to get away for a couple of days. It's only when we're getting on to the bus that we realise we're the youngest passengers by far, and I mean Madeleine and me, not the children. 'Mama why are their only grannies going on holiday?' says Napirai, in a voice loud enough for them all to hear.

I tell her that older people have more free time to take holidays as they don't have to go to work. I can't think of anything else to say. Our

children end up entertaining the whole bus on the journey. Napirai keeps choosing a different 'granny' to go and sit with which amuses all of them. We end up having three very lively days in which the children more than pay their way.

Another time I borrow my mother's ancient two-man tent and take my daughter camping at a lake not far from home. It's a simple little campsite in the middle of a forest. Our tent is the smallest and funniest looking so we put it up on a little hillock. I scrape a shallow ditch around it like I did around our *manyatta* in Kenya so that if it rains it will channel the water away. It turns out to have been worth while doing as during the night a storm comes over the lake. Napirai and I lie there on our tummies looking out at the spectacle; there's no question in any case of either of us getting to sleep because of the thunder. Long flashes of lightning crash across the lake and illuminate the whole landscape, as we watch in fascination.

The next day it's hard to find dry wood to make a fire to grill our sausages. The ground is sodden and several tents have collapsed and even been washed away. But we decide to hold our ground and by midday are rewarded by the first rays of sun. Later I go and snap some brittle twigs from the trees around as these will dry out quickest in the air and before long we manage to get our fire going and eventually enjoy a belated lunch. I can see how much Napirai enjoys hanging out with her mum.

When I go back to work after the summer holidays my employers tell me they're getting divorced and the company's head office is moving. That means I can no longer just pop in to discuss what I need to order but would have to make a couple of hours' journey in the car. I'm not exactly thrilled to hear this as it means giving up time with Napirai and I tell them I'm going to have to think it over.

Back home I take out the business card of the sales chief at the T-shirt company and ring up, with no great expectation that he'll actually remember me. But he does and sounds pleased to hear from me and we arrange a meeting at his office. When I arrive there, a couple of days later, I'm impressed to see how smart and professional it all seems. I'm fascinated by the huge screen press machines used for printing the various designs on the T-shirts. The embroidery department is interesting too.

Over a cup of coffee we talk terms. The basic salary would be more or less the same but I would get a bigger commission and some expenses as well. Everything considered, I'd end up getting more than I'm getting now. That makes the decision obvious and we agree that I should start as soon as possible.

I have to give four weeks' notice at my old job and so on 1 October 1993, I start the third job I've had since coming back from

Africa. I'm feeling really motivated though as I get on with my new boss and think there's a lot of potential. Above all, the embroidered company logos offer great marketing potential. I also have my existing customer base to fall back on and initially at least manage some sensational figures here and there. I don't mind switching jobs for a single second and reflect that so far each change of job has been a change for the better.

* * *

One evening in November I find a note from the post office to go and pick up a registered letter. It turns out to be a court summons to deal with my divorce. Actually seeing the thing in black and white is all of a sudden extremely sobering. I'm likely to get divorced from my husband without him knowing anything about it. The hearing is set for 30 November 1993 at five p.m. and I am required to attend, with or without legal representation.

God, I hadn't thought of that: I haven't got a lawyer! Do I need one? Or should I just ask my mother to come along? Or even Madeleine? But then I make up my mind to go alone as in the end I'm the only one who knows the whole story. I've been toughened up by my experience in the sales world and my self-confidence is light years away from what it was in those first few months after my return from Kenya when I hardly dared go out alone.

On the day in question I take two salary statements along so that I can easily prove my ability to support us, as well as a list of my day-to-day expenses and some photographs of my husband and of our life in Africa. It all feels rather sinister though, as I've never been inside a courthouse before. Here and there knots of people are gathered outside the doors, mostly huddled around a lawyer in full robes. I feel as if I must look lost wandering around on my own with a thin file under my arm. When my name is called I walk rather nervously into a room where there are already four people. I sit down on the seat facing the judge. The names of the persons involved are read out and then it's up to me to give a brief account of my life with Lketinga.

As I quickly realise that the judge has simply no idea about the tribe my husband belongs to I ask in finishing if it would help if I produced a few photographs. He hesitates briefly, then agrees. I lay out six photos on the bench in front of him. One of them shows my husband in full warpaint carrying his spear, another is of men slaughtering an ox outside our *manyatta*, and a third shows the pair of us with our daughter Napirai.

He clears his throat and asks incredulously: ‘This is your

husband?' The other gentlemen and ladies get up and come over to see the photos for themselves. They have a brief discussion with the judge who then asks me if he might keep the photos with the rest of the documents until the case has been settled. I agree and they let me go until the date of the next hearing. Leaving the building I already feel freer than I did entering it.

Two weeks later, mid-December, I am called to the next hearing. This time it's serious. The same people are there again. Once again they ask me if I've still heard nothing from my husband or know where he is. I answer on oath that I have no further information. Then they ask me if I want to make any demands for maintenance, and I say no. Finally the judge says that under the circumstances the marriage can be considered dissolved with the following conditions: the daughter produced as a result of this marriage should be given into the custody — what a horrid word! — of the mother. It is noted that the mother makes no demands for maintenance payments, and it is also noted that neither of the partners has any further claims on the other. Costs remain to be decided and for Lketinga's benefit, the court's decision will be published in the official gazette. How absurd!

The final detail is that in the absence of further intervention by either party within the next ten days the decree will be considered absolute. My head is spinning and I'm left standing there in a daze as the four of them start gathering up their documents. Somewhat uncertainly I ask them: 'Is that it? I'm divorced now? Is that really all there is? Or do I have to go and collect something or pay something.' The circuit judge simply nods and disappears.

I leave the room walking in slow motion scarcely able to believe that it's all gone so smoothly. Eventually I come to realise that this is chiefly because Lketinga has, so to speak, 'taken off. It's only when I get outside into the cold December air that I'm overcome with joy at realizing that no one now can take Napirai away from me, as long as I don't go back to Kenya. I drive straight round to my mother's who's as pleased as I am and invites us over for dinner.

Memories Come Flooding Back

Shortly before Christmas I get my last salary cheque of the year. Including a Christmas bonus it comes to a pleasing amount and for once I can afford a really good holiday for Napirai and myself. After a few minutes reflection, I head down to the travel agent's and tell them I want to go somewhere sunny and warm where there's no danger from malaria. After listening to their advice I decide to book a flight to the Dominican Republic. I'm looking forward to spending two whole weeks being pampered and having my daughter all to myself, eating whenever we feel like it and splashing around in the sea as long as we like. I wonder how Napirai will react to being surrounded by black people again, and if it will remind her of her Papa?

* * *

Just before we're due to leave I get another letter from Barsaloi. James apologies for not having written for a long time but they've had a lot of problems. First of all they were involved in terrible fighting with rebels who stole nearly all of their animals and a lot of people were killed. Now the rains have finally come again but Barsaloi is infested with mosquitos and it's only a matter of time before malaria is rampant.

He's pleased however because he's got a job in the new school in Barsaloi, but for now there aren't many pupils, not least because some of the local children have already died of malaria. There have also been fatalities in Barsaloi's little makeshift hospital. But he's glad that at least the fighting is over and he's got a job of any sort. In the meantime prices have risen for almost everything: rice, clothing, sugar and even maize flour which now costs ten times what it did when I lived there. It's unbelievable! He's planning to go down to Mombasa in December to see if he can locate Lketinga, and will write again if he has any news.

On the one hand I'm really pleased to get his letter as it's been ages since I've heard from him. On the other, he's got me really worried about my former family whose lives seem to have become really difficult. I recall my own terrible attacks of malaria. The alternating bouts of fever and shivering turn you into a complete wreck in next to no time. At the same time you get diarrhea and despite having an empty stomach feel an almost continuous need to vomit, until eventually you're left lying there in bed exhausted and lifeless. It's an illness I wouldn't wish on anyone but all I can do is

hope it doesn't plague Barsaloi for long. Apart from anything else, though, I'm fascinated to know whether James will find Lketinga in Mombasa and what he'll tell me in his next letter. It has, after all, been three years now since I heard from him.

* * *

At last it's time and Napirai and I get back on an airplane for the first time since we fled from Kenya. This time our destination is Porto Plata. It's a long flight but they give Napirai some coloring books and pencils and she plays with those until she eventually falls asleep. Walking through the airport after landing reminds me immediately of the first time I landed in Mombasa all those years ago and was overwhelmed by the tropical atmosphere. Suddenly it all comes flooding back to me and I don't know whether I'm really in Porto Plata or back in Mombasa.

Outside there are little buses waiting to take us to the hotel. Looking out of the windows I gaze at the palm-lined, rough and ready roads, the black people and their brightly-brightly-colored clothes. Already this early in the morning the air is warm. I'd forgotten how much I love it like that. I can see my life in Kenya again unfolding before my eyes. Every pothole reminds me of the appalling road conditions in northern Kenya. My head's swimming and there are tears rolling down my cheeks but at the same time I feel happy and almost reborn. My emotions and all the memories of the past that I've been suppressing completely overwhelm me in minutes and I'm glad there aren't too many tourists on the bus to see my embarrassing tears. By contrast, when Napirai looks out of the window the thing that impresses her most is how many palm trees there are.

By the time we reach the hotel I've managed to get my emotions under control. The hotel is nicely situated, right next to the sea and our room is big, bright and comfortable. When we turn up for the new arrivals' meeting in the lobby I notice that there aren't many families with children; most of the other tourists are romantically involved couples. But there's a children's club which will keep Napirai happy and I've got lots to read and lots of letters to write. The buffet is magnificent and we try as many exotic dishes as we can. The hotel employees are all enchanted by Napirai and say she must be Dominican. Immediately someone asks me if I've come back to visit her father, and I have to laugh at the disappointment on their faces when I tell them she comes from Kenya. Within a couple of days she's completely at home, running around the hotel with a couple of other children, and I hardly even see her.

One evening after dinner she tells me that she got to know a woman with very long blond hair at lunch. She wants to show her to me straight away and runs off. Five minutes later she's back bringing a tall blond woman over to my table. She tells me her name is Andrea and she's here with a boyfriend. They're both from southern Germany and she invites me over to join their table as they're a group of very different couples and I'm bound to find it entertaining, she says. Napirai is transfixed by this Andrea, primarily because of her long blond hair which she keeps running her little brown fingers through. Over the course of our holiday my little daughter keeps repeating one deeply-felt but completely impossible wish: 'Mama, I want to have hair like hers!'

From now on Andrea and I spend a lot of time together as her boyfriend seems to prefer lying by the pool reading endless magazines to spending time talking to his nice girlfriend.

I can't understand him but I understand one thing: that it's a lot better going on holiday on your own than going with someone else and still being on your own.

The first week I simply enjoy lounging around and being lazy, but during the second week I start to get restless and want to do something more. Although it all reminded me so much of Kenya initially, this is a quite different country. Kenya is much more wild, more multi-faceted and above all has a lot more animals. Somehow or other I still miss Kenya and keep comparing the two, with the result that I'm not all that sad when the holiday comes to an end.

* * *

Back home I devote all my energy to my new job. The printed and embroidered T-shirts go down well with lots of companies, either as a promotional gift or as a staff uniform. And in the meantime the economy is on such a boom that lots of pubs and restaurants can even sell T-shirts with their logo on or baseball caps with motifs that advertise them. My business therefore is on a roll too and that means a lot more spare cash too. So much that I can afford to hand a hundred-franc note to one of the women from our group who can't even afford her bus fares, and at the same time I've been able to find jobs for one or two of the others.

Increasingly I'm getting to know other interesting women through work and get friendly with them. One of them, called Hanni, is always on at me to tell her more of my stories from Africa whenever I go in to show her my samples. She's so taken with my stories that she keeps telling me I should turn them into a book. I just laugh and say, 'Hanni,

first of all I wouldn't know how and secondly, I've already got a full-time job as well as a flat to run and a daughter to look after.' As far as I'm concerned that's the end of it, but over the next few months Hanni keeps on at me with the same idea.

* * *

In mid-February 1994 I get another letter from Kenya. I'm consumed by curiosity as I open it and read through the usual good wishes from the family. Then James says he's been down to Mombasa and found Lketinga, who was in a bad state, nothing more than skin and bones and had more than a few problems. Not only does he no longer have the car, he scarcely has any proper clothes. James had to go and buy him some and has now brought him back home. He's living with Mama now and wants to get married again but James doesn't think he'll be able to because he has hardly anything he can call his own.

James also tells me that the money I sent to the mission to be handed over to Mama on a monthly basis has all been used up now. She sends her thanks for having supported her so long. But James asks for another contribution because she's having problems with her eyes now that only a doctor can help with. He says he'll write again if there's more news, especially anything concerning Lketinga.

I'm relieved that after such a long time, Lketinga is finally back living at home. But at the same time I'm sad that he has nothing left of the relative riches I left him. Even so, I hope he finds some way to get married again. Funny, I think to myself, it's not two months since I got divorced from Lketinga because I had heard nothing of him for more than three years, and now all of a sudden he turns up back home, talking about getting married again himself. What strange tricks fate plays!

* * *

Time just flies past now. Weekends are mostly reserved for my female friends and their children. Now that it's winter we often go skating or tobogganing down the slopes at the end of the village, which is a lot of fun. Afterwards we all sit together in my warm flat and chat while the children play.

One day, coming into spring, — the telephone rings and I recognize with astonishment, the voice of Andrea, the German woman with the long blond hair. People on holiday often exchange addresses

at the end of the trip but as a rule you never hear from them again. But now Andrea wants to come and see us. Napirai is delighted. Barely one week later she turns up, on her own, and tells me that her relationship isn't working out: her boyfriend simply doesn't seem to find the time for her any more. Napirai says in that case she should just come and see us more often, and she'll do wonderful things with her hair. Andrea doesn't seem too enthusiastic about that but promises to come back and see us again soon. A few weeks later she does indeed come back after I ask her whether she has the time or inclination to take part in the opening of a shop run by friends of mine who also happen to be customers. She agreed immediately and so the two of us joined in organizing a successful event which would turn out to change her life forever. That evening she fell in love; six months later she moved to Switzerland and a year after that got married. From then on we became good friends, which in turn was going to alter my life dramatically.

* * *

Early in 1995 I got a reassuring letter from James to tell me Lketinga had married a young woman and she's already pregnant. I'm really thrilled to hear this and relieved at the same time to hear he's going to be a father again. His new wife is a girl who lived near our *manyatta.* James will send me a photograph whenever he gets the chance to borrow a camera. I can't wait to see who the girl is: if she lived near us I'm bound to recognize her. I'm really pleased for Lketinga and immediately sit down to write a letter in reply and transfer some money so he can buy a cow for the wedding. I wonder what their child will look like. Will there be a resemblance to Napirai? But for now I just have to control my curiosity and wait patiently; even if James does get hold of a camera it could take two months to get a film developed.

* * *

I'm still enjoying work, particularly as my turnover is growing faster than ever. During the course of the spring a new employee joins the firm to help out with the management. As soon as I meet him I realise he's a completely different character to my current boss and I can't imagine how the pair of them can work together. But it doesn't matter to me, as I work mostly on my own and rarely come into the firm. I've got other things to worry about: Napirai will start nursery

after the summer holidays and that means I'll have to find a new childminder because the one she has at present doesn't live in the same area as us. Once again I'm lucky and a family we already know is able to look after my daughter. This new family has four children of their own, a girl and three boys, and it doesn't take long for Napirai to feel at home with them too, even if it is a big change at first to have so many other children competing for attention. During the course of the year my mother and Hanspeter move to our village too.

Eventually the big day comes for Napirai to go to kindergarten, proudly carrying her satchel and wearing her luminous road-safety vest. At the kindergarten, an elderly lady introduces herself as the nursery teacher. There are several other parents there and a few of them give us sideways glances rather than a straightforward welcome, partly because I'm the only single mother. But Napirai gets stared at openly by the other children and all of a sudden she doesn't like it. There's no way she wants me to leave her there on her own. It's not the way she normally behaves at all and thank goodness over the course of the next few days she gets over it.

In fact now she more frequently spends the night at the childminder's or with my mother which means I can go out more. Hanni and I quite often go out for the evening for a meal and then go dancing. It seems she knows the world and its wife: wherever we go she meets people she knows and introduces me as the ‘African one’, which leaves me having to answer a lot of questions. Even five years after my return, it seems there are people interested in my love story, and Hanni keeps pestering me to write it all down.

I Decide to Write My Story

Gradually her niggling gets to me and more and more frequently I start playing with the idea of writing my story down. One evening I pick up a checked school notebook and a pencil and hesitantly start trying to cast my mind back nine years.

I think back to landing for the first time in Mombasa on holiday with my then-partner Marco and how the atmosphere of the place and the first impressions had a huge impact on me, as if I were coming home after a long spell away. Back then I couldn't explain it to myself and my first glimpse of Lketinga went right to my soul and overturned my whole life in a matter of seconds. One sight of him and it was as if my whole life up until then had not existed. And now I can see it, feel it, smell it all over again as if it were all happening once more, and it seems my hand starts writing of its own accord, setting all those experiences down on paper. The whole story unwinds before my inner eye like a film and I don't have to think for a second about what I'm writing: it simply writes itself!

I hardly notice the time going by and it's only when my fingers start to ache that I look up at the clock and am shocked to find it's long past midnight. ‘Oh my God, I need to get to bed. Tomorrow is another hard day at work,’ I say to myself. Quietly I slip into bed next to Napirai, who's sound asleep, but rest won't come. I keep writing away in my mind until at last I fall asleep.

The next day when I pick up my daughter after work I read my mother the first few pages I've written. She's surprised but delighted: ‘Are you going to write a book, then?’ she asks. ‘No, no. I'm just going to write it all down so that one day Napirai will understand how great her parents’ love for one another was and how nonetheless they simply couldn't manage to stay together. If anything were to happen to me, nobody else would be able to tell her her true origins.’ My mother immediately goes off to find the letters I wrote her from Africa and gives them to me to help my memory.

Back home I make dinner and see to Napirai. Then when she goes to bed at seven o'clock I quickly do my household chores and finally have the peace and time to read through the pages I wrote the day before. Before long I'm back in the past again and writing away once more almost automatically. I can see Lketinga standing there before me as I describe this tall, good-looking, incredibly exotic, almost feminine man, with his lean strong muscles and wild shining eyes. The setting sun lends a particular glow to his brown body, painted face and long red hair in tight plaits. His long thin body, dressed in nothing more than a red loincloth and a few bead necklaces, is sleek

and seductive. Once again I find myself, even as I write down my recollections, seized by a powerful attraction.

All of a sudden the phone rings. Rudely dragged back to the present I pick up the receiver and answer tersely. It's Madeleine asking if she can come over with a bottle of wine to talk about something. Normally I'd be glad but right now I don't want to be hauled back to reality. Madeleine senses it and says: 'Hey, Corinne, what's the matter? Have you got someone there? Am I interrupting?' She makes me feel somewhat ashamed of my attitude and I tell her: 'don't be silly, of course you can come round. I've got something to tell you too.'

A few minutes later there's a knock at the door and Madeleine slips in, heading straight through to the living room with a big smile on her face and a bottle of red wine under her arm. When she asks why I sound so distracted I go and fetch the first pages I've written and read them aloud to her. 'It's good,' she says, 'really good,' genuinely fascinated. 'But when I think how long it's going to take you to write it all down I think we're not going to be able to meet up for so long in the evenings. But I can't wait to see how it turns out.'

Over the next couple of months things at work take a radical turn for the worse, to the extent that the 'old' boss resigns leaving lots of people, including me, uncertain about their futures. There's a whole different atmosphere about the place before long. One day I come in for a meeting to find the receptionist in tears. Another day I walk in on a real shouting match. There aren't as many orders coming in as there used to be and some of my customers start complaining for the first time. I keep hoping that things will pick up again, but what matters more to me now is getting back to my writing each evening, which has become a virtual addiction.

* * *

Towards the end of August I get an invitation through the post to a school reunion in October. I look forward to it hugely, wondering what's become of all my old school friends, none of whom I've seen since we all left. I'm particularly looking forward to seeing my old friend Therese.

There are already lots of people there when I arrive and I'm almost embarrassed to find that at first I hardly recognize anyone. Dressed up in my elegant black leather suit and with my bright red hair I feel exaggeratedly conspicuous. Everybody else seems to be a lot more understated. After an aperitif, we all go up to the restaurant for dinner. The table is shaped like a horseshoe so that all twenty or so people present can see each other properly. Only now do I notice a

new arrival. That's Markus, a boy I remember from school who had almost the same name as my former boyfriend! Sitting next to one of our former teachers. He's the life and soul of the party cheering everybody up with his witty comments and big beaming smile, just like back at school. He's grown up to be an attractive man. Of course, I liked him way back in the third year. On the other hand, he thought I was too tall and skinny. I found out later that's why he never replied to my crazy little notes.

During the meal he keeps making provocative comments about my appearance to the teacher next to him and at one stage calls out, loud enough for all to hear: 'Hey Corinne, if you'd looked like that years ago I'd have fancied you.' I shoot back, 'Well it's your own fault you didn't take the chance twenty-five years ago, when you still had it.' A lot of people laugh at this although one or two don't get the joke.

Unfortunately my old friend Therese doesn't turn up and a few others I'd like to have seen don't show either. After dinner we end up in little groups talking to one another and laughing and drinking. Markus is the focal point for a lot of the women, unsurprisingly, as he's good looking and talks intelligently and amusingly. He runs an engineering firm now, and is married with two daughters. A proper ideal husband, I think to myself, slightly jealous of the woman who's found a man like him to share her life with. At that moment I made up my mind that my next partner would be as self-confident, good-looking and good-good-humoredas Markus. If he had said he wasn't married I would have told him I didn't believe it. But that's how people lose sight of one another. Long after the reunion night I keep talking to my girlfriends about it and meeting Markus like that.

* * *

Napirai has taken to the kindergarten and her new childminder like a duck to water. She's a lively, self-sufficient little girl and yet still very affectionate. Every night when I pick her up to take her home she throws her long arms and legs around me. She's the sunshine of my life, the only thing that matters.'

Slowly, however, I'm beginning to get fed up with work. Nothing gets done properly any more, and there's a high staff turnover. Some people have been sacked but others have just left because they can't take the atmosphere any more. I've started thinking myself about what I should do. I've been with this firm three years now and built up a good client base. I earn enough to maintain a decent standard of living and take my daughter on holiday every year.

I return to work after the Christmas holidays with a funny feeling

in my stomach and an absolute lack of enthusiasm. As ever at the beginning of the new year, I drive in to the office to wish everyone a happy new year and talk over coming plans. But this time the minute I enter the building I can sense there's something wrong. The boss calls all the sales representatives to a meeting and tells them the company's in trouble, that there are going to have to be compulsory redundancies and that includes the whole of the sales force.

I'm left sitting there as if someone had slapped me round the face. This man's only been in the job for a year and already he's ruined the firm and we've all lost our jobs. I ask him how he thinks he's going to get new contracts if he doesn't have any sales representatives. Quite coolly he says he's going to deal with the big clients himself, while the smaller ones are going to have to accept the situation and come in themselves to place their orders. He makes it sound so easy. I'm quite shocked!

All the same I'm calm enough to negotiate my redundancy terms with a clear head. I suggest that the firm continues to pay my wages for the three-month notice period and I'll continue to turn up to see customers I've already arranged to meet but won't try to attract any new customers, as there's nothing worse than trying to sell something with no enthusiasm. By the end of our discussion we're both glad enough to be parting on good terms.

Nonetheless I drive home still feeling numb. I can hardly believe how quickly the firm went belly-up. Right now I don't know if I've got the guts or enthusiasm to start all over again. I feel I really need to talk it all over with someone and so decide to call by on my friend Anneliese. She's the one who's been good enough to type up my handwritten manuscript on her computer and is always impatient to get the next installment. But even after seeing her I find myself out of sorts and not knowing what to do next, so I drive over to my mother's. It's her turn to hear my sorry tale. She looks worried for me, but tries to cheer me up by saying: ‘Up until now you've been so lucky. You'll do it again. You'll soon find a new job. don't let it get you down!’

But for the first time in my life I no longer feel so sure about that and I start to feel that so far every time I build something up I get it taken away from me. Over the next few days I take work as it comes and I'm glad when a prearranged meeting falls through. I drop in to see one or two customers to say goodbye personally. A lot of them feel very let down and tell me that without me coming round to see them they won't place any more orders with the company. In the meantime, however, I start thinking about finding a new job and start studying the situations vacant adverts, but there's nothing even remotely suitable.

As a result the remainder of my notice period simply flies by and

before I know it I'm unemployed. I had never thought it possible I would end up in such a situation in Switzerland. But after six years' continuous employment I now find myself having to sign on for the dole. Going down to the unemployment office is something I find really hard. But contrary to all my expectations they treat me really courteously and kindly. They tell me I have to wait two months and then I'll be entitled to eighty per cent of my previous salary. They won't however take into account the expenses I received for my car so I'll have to pay the leasing company's charges. But I'll get by OK as long as I just cut a few corners. I'm more confident now that I'll get a job again soon, although I'm not sure just what it'll be. It does seem to be particularly bad luck that the job market has dried up at the moment. I put a new ad of my own in the paper but that turns out to be an expense that brings nothing in.

Once I've got over the initial shock however and my reaction to it, I find myself enjoying the opportunity of seeing more of Napirai. At lunchtime, I spend ages cooking something nice for the two of us and listening first-hand to all her stories of what went on at kindergarten. Previously I only heard all of this, second-hand, if at all, from her childminder. I take care, however, not to lose touch with her either and whenever I get interviews I take Napirai to stay with her as I'm still hoping to find a new job soon. But my hopes start to fade after two months on the dole and I can feel myself slipping into lethargy.

It's around this time that one of my friends gives me the address of a fortune teller. Even though I don't really believe in that sort of thing and certainly can't afford the expense, I go to see her in the hope of finding out something about what I'm going to do with my life. She turns out to be about seventy years old, living in a tiny old house, with a garden and window boxes full of gnomes. Just the sight of them makes me smirk to myself as I bend down to get through the door into a low-ceilinged living room decorated with photographs, artificial flowers and lots of other kitsch.

I sit down opposite the old lady at her kitchen table, filled with curiosity about what's going to happen next. Obviously I'm skeptical about the whole business but I tell myself I can't dismiss something I've never even tried. As I sit there laying out cards on the table, a ginger cat comes and settles itself on my lap completing the image of a witch's cottage. As I place the cards one on top of the other the old woman starts explaining what they mean. Even though I've told her nothing about myself she says she can see that I live alone with a child and that's not going to change any time soon. Well there you go, but I haven't come to find out about my love life. What I want to know is where and how I'm going to find another job.

She keeps looking up and then down at the cards and then

pronounces sagely that I've led a crazy life somewhere abroad and that it's still dominating my life. She looks up at me and asks if I write a lot of letters or if there's any other way in which I'm trying to come to terms with my past. I tell her briefly that in fact at the moment I'm writing down the story of my life in Africa with my child's father. 'So, are you going to write a book?' 'Yes, but I don't know if I want to publish it,' I tell her perfectly honestly.

She listens to me but not very attentively as far as I can make out, while she shuffles the cards again and tells me to start laying some of them out again. Then all of a sudden, she bursts into life and says: 'I can tell you one thing: you have to keep on with what you're doing and publish the book. It will be a great success, yes, even way beyond the boundaries of our little Switzerland.' I laugh with her at this but say: 'Maybe, maybe, but that's a long way off. What I want to know is what sort of job I can do in the immediate future?' 'Everything will be fine,' she tells me, 'just don't rush into anything. Take your time.'

Driving home I think to myself that that hasn't got me very far. She just might be right about the book, wouldn't that be nice? But I've got to finish it first. Every evening when Napirai has gone to bed and I've got time to myself, I plunge back into my memories and try to pin them down on paper. It's become a compulsion as much as a ritual. When I get home the first thing I do is call Hanni who's been reading what I write as I go along. I tell her what the fortune teller said and she thinks it's wonderful and laughs: 'I've been telling you that for years. You wait and see — they'll end up making a film out of it.' We both laugh at that. She says she's missed not seeing more of me, either at work or privately. The trouble is I hardly go out at all any more as I need to keep count of every franc to avoid ending up in debt.

After three months on the dole I eventually get a new job, even if I'm not absolutely sure about it. Even so it's better than queuing up every Friday at the benefit office with my unemployment certificate in my hand. It's a company that sells haircare products to big shops and chemists. Before long I realise that I have so many customers to get round that if I want to do the job properly I can hardly ever get home before seven o'clock, which means I see my daughter for an hour a day at most. I have hardly any time to eat properly, least of all at lunch and before long my mother's telling me I'm starting to look ill again. My nerves are so bad that I give up the job even before the end of the probationary period.

Apart from anything my evening writing routine is taking more out of me, not least because I feel I'm going through some of those experiences again, both physically and. psychologically. By the time I've finished writing about one of my severe bouts of illness I'm actually feeling seriously ill and run down. Then there are other

occasions when I have to give up writing because I'm in floods of tears. Every now and then I actually give it a break for an evening or two to gather my strength again. It's been eight months now but I'm gradually approaching the end, even though I'm not exactly sure where the end should be.

* * *

James's most recent letter says thanks for the photos of Napirai. Mama and Lketinga were very upset when they saw them; they miss us both so much still. He encloses a picture of Lketinga's new wife. I immediately recognize her as someone who as a little girl used to come into the shop often to buy sugar or maize flour. She was very quiet and relatively inconspicuous. I'm pleased for the two of them and particularly to hear from James that Lketinga has given up alcohol completely. He says he'll send me a picture of their new baby later. It's a little girl, ten months old already. But his long letter contains bad news too. Lketinga's older brother's wife, Mama Saguna, has had a lot of health problems and has been in hospital now for three months. She can't come home until they've paid the hospital bill and on top of that they owe money to the Somalis for a makeshift ambulance service to take her from Barsaloi to Wamba. I can imagine it really must have been a matter of life and death, because a patient has to be more dead than alive before they even think of a hospital. I know from my own experience that first of all they'll try every type of traditional medicine. James says my mother-in-law has now got his brother's five children and their newborn living with her and none of them have enough to eat. James asks me once again to send some money to help them, which upsets me a lot, primarily because now that I'm unemployed I haven't even enough money to get by myself. Instead I ask my older brother and Hanspeter if they can spare some which both readily agree to.

* * *

Otherwise being unemployed again no longer bothers me so much. While I was back at work I realised that I want to try something completely new, something more demanding. At thirty-six I'm still young enough to do some further education. I spend every day poring over the newspapers for opportunities.

At the same time I'm busy getting Napirai ready for her first day at school. How time flies! Already my daughter is about to go to

school and embark on the first step in the serious business of life. If she had still been living with her father's tribe, she'd probably already be out all day in the baking sun with a herd of goats. Her beautiful hair would have been shaved off with a razor blade and she'd be wearing no more than a kanga and her first necklace. No, when I think about it, I'm glad things have turned out as they have.

My mother and I go along with her proudly for her first day at school. She looks absolutely beautiful in her pretty little summer dress with her brown skin and her braided hair down to her shoulders. She opens up her brightly colored satchel and sets her pencil case on her desk to listen to the pleasant young schoolteacher, who, as a bonus, turns out to have long blond hair which has always fascinated Napirai.

Before long she hardly notices my mother and me, and we slip quietly away for an hour or so.

* * *

In the meantime I've been scribbling down my story of Africa like a madwoman. One evening I find myself recalling the time live and a half years previously when I was sitting with Napirai in the bus from Mombasa to Nairobi pleading with Lketinga to sign the piece of paper I've prepared, agreeing to let us leave the country for three weeks. All of a sudden I feel myself beginning to tremble all over and my chest constrict as if there's a huge weight pressing down on it. I can literally hear the parping of the bus horn and hear Lketinga saying in a sad doubtful voice: 7 *don't know if I see you and Napirai again'* Then with a brusque couple of words he jumps off the bus and we set off. I look down at the piece of paper in my hands and see he's signed it and the tears roll down my cheeks as I stare silently at the world rushing by outside.

No sooner have I written these few lines than I have to throw the pencil and writing pad to one side and burst into tears. My whole body is shaking and wracked with sobbing. Right then I decide not to write a single line more. I wrap my arms around myself as if looking for some form of comfort and feel as if I'm being pulled down into some hole in the ground. I'm crying for my beloved Kenya, my great love and my shattered dream, for all the wonderful and terrible things I've experienced in this almost surreal world.

All of a sudden my little Napirai is standing in front of me, woken from her sleep and staring at me in shock with tears in her eyes: 'Mama, why are you crying like that? Have you hurt yourself? You never cry!' I lift her up on to my lap and hold her tight while I try to get my breath back, taking huge gulps of air. 'I haven't hurt myself

darling. I'm just crying because I couldn't manage to be happy with your daddy.' 'But you've got me,' the child replies, sobbing herself now. I do my best to console her, stroking her back gently until she calms down again. Then I take her back to our bed and promise I won't cry again. Back in the living room I glance at the clock and am astounded to see that it's gone two a.m. That means I must have been wallowing in my own misery for the best part of three hours. I would never have imagined that writing up my African story would have such an effect. I was certain I had achieved closure on that episode in my life. But it looks as if I had only suppressed it all. I haven't cried so much in years and now gradually I feel a great calm creeping over me almost as if I'd been given a sedative.

I make the decision to get this last pad to Anneliese to be typed up as soon as possible so that at last the whole thing will be behind me. Because I've been sitting on the floor to write I ache all over, but at least I've done it! Our story is down on paper and with that reassuring thought in my mind I soon fall fast asleep. The next day my eyes are so swollen from the crying of the night before that I can hardly see to fix breakfast for Napirai. I promise her I'll cook us something nice later and by midday I'm back to my old happy self.

A few days later Anneliese brings me my ten handwritten notepads back along with a typed and printed script. Now my four years in the Kenyan bush are lying there in a file on my desk. I can hardly believe it. We drink to the possibility of it becoming a successful book and I promise her that if it gets published I'll pay for a super holiday for her. I tell the family that my 'opus' is complete and Eric offers to make copies for me so I can send it off to several publishing houses.

You Can Learn Anything if You Try

I'm flicking through the small ads as usual when suddenly my eye lights on a boxed ad looking for a woman between twenty-four and thirty with knowledge of the dental business to sell high-quality products to dentists. Experience in the sales representative business would be an advantage but is not essential. The job offers a good salary and a company car. I read it again and tell myself it's just the job I've been looking for. You can learn anything if you try and my experience as a sales rep has got to count in my favor. What sort of dentist is going to buy anything from a twenty-four-year-old.

That's the frame of mind I'm in as I apply to the agency. A week later I get an invitation to a preliminary interview. I go through my CV with the interviewer and he seems particularly interested in my time in Kenya. At the end I have an hour in which to do a test on the computer. As I'm leaving the interviewer tells me I'll have to wait to hear if I get onto the shortlist. There have been more than eighty applicants for the job. When I hear that I decide not to get my hopes up as I don't exactly fit their bill too closely.

* * *

In the next few days I pop into a bookshop to ask which publishers might be interested in taking a look at my manuscript. I reckon on talking to the big firms only as there doesn't seem any point in making my life story public if only a few hundred copies are going to be printed. If it's going to come out it would be best if it were published in Germany, and then Switzerland would be just automatically covered. I leave the bookshop with a whole list of addresses and when I get home I start ringing round.

It doesn't take long for the reality check to kick in. After giving a brief description of my story over the phone I'm already getting automatic rejections. One or two of the firms, however, agree to take a look at the manuscript, including Scherz, Knaur and Heyne. I get copies made of a few of my best photographs from Africa and write an accompanying letter referring to the phone conversation. Finally I attach a recent photo of myself to the accompanying letter and send it off with my fingers firmly crossed. They say I'll have to wait up to three months for an answer.

* * *

The employment agency invites me for a second interview, which perks up my interest in the job again. If I've got that far maybe my chances aren't that bad after all. Once again I have a meeting with the same interviewer who tells me I did well in the test. Then he asks me if I would be able to go abroad on a training course lasting about ten days. Of course I say yes. At the end of our conversation he asks me rather embarrassedly if I would mind toning down the bright-red color of my hair as dentists are rather conservative, as is the head of department I'm due to meet in the next few days. I have to laugh but tell him:

'Look, up to now I've done fine with my hair this color, selling all sorts of things. This red hair is sort of my trademark; it's become part of my personality. I don't think it does any harm to bring a bit of color into the lives of people set in their ways.'

'Fine, fine, I get the message. We'll see how it goes,' he says. 'I'll let you know some dates but there are still eight other people on the shortlist.'

I thank him and leave the building, hoping against hope that I really do get the job. On the way home I even stop at a church to light a candle and offer up a prayer.

A couple of days later a letter inviting me to go and see the dental company arrives. It's a big, modern pharmaceutical concern and as soon as I enter the building my initial nervousness vanishes and I feel at ease even before I've met the man I've come to see. He turns out to be just a few years older than me and seems very nice, quiet and even a little shy. With my height, my red hair and in my classic blue suit I feel even as if he might find me a bit intimidating. But he relaxes a bit as we get talking and before long he's even chuckling at my stories. I get the impression we're getting on well. After an hour he tells me he's made his mind up: my energy and my unusual life story make me just the right person as far as he's concerned but the 'big boss' will have to agree.

There are still two more people the top man is interested in who actually have experience in the dental profession. It's possible the 'big boss' will want to see me. He does, two days later. The 'big boss' turns out to be a skinny little man which makes me feel even more awkward. We've barely sat down together than he fires the question at me: 'Just why do you think you're the right person for this job? Where do you see yourself ten years from now? How good are you at coping with the pressure of training, working and looking after your child?' After two hours' interrogation I'm allowed to leave and told I'll hear in a week's time either one way or the other or be called back in for another interview. I stand up and look the two of them straight in the eye and say: 'Gentlemen, I would be delighted to come and work for

you but I don't think there is anything more I can tell you. You've seen me now too and I think I'm the last of the three candidates you wanted to interview, so I'll expect to hear from you by Monday, as I'm afraid I do have other offers. I hope you'll understand my situation and I wish you both a pleasant weekend.'

With that I shake hands with both of them and leave. I've no idea whether my little speech was a good idea or not but in the end people have to make up their minds!

It's nearly noon so I drive over to where Hanni works to have lunch with her. As it's Friday, we decide to go out dancing again this evening. On the way home my mobile phone rings and it's my future boss: 'Congratulations, Frau Hofmann. You've convinced the 'big boss'. Now it's up to you to show us what you can do. You start on November 1.' I'm completely taken aback and laugh aloud as I answer: 'Wow! Super! I'm really really pleased and will do my absolute best for you.'

'I know you will,' he says, laughing too, and promises to send me out a contract in the next couple of days. I've done it again! I've beaten off eighty other competitors. I'm absolutely delighted to find I'm no longer unemployed and have a well-paid and interesting job.

When I get back home I'm in seventh heaven until I open my letter box and find the first of my manuscripts returned with a brief accompanying note: 'Returned with thanks. We regret we see no place in our catalogue to publish your work.'

* * *

I take a look at my manuscript and get the immediate impression that nobody has even bothered to take a look at it. Every single page still looks as if it has just come off the printer: neat, tidy and never been read. I don't give a damn! I've just got a good new job that I won't be tempted to give up over the next few years. I can go and choose a company car, I've got a decent expense account, a good salary and I get a percentage of the sales profits. I'm not giving all that up easily, I tell myself, as I dump the returned manuscript in the cellar.

By the time I'm due to start my new job on November 1, all the other packages have come back too, each one with a similar rejection. One of the publishers even says that it's just not exciting enough! I can hardly believe what I'm reading. There I was living out in the open, deep in the bush, going from one extreme to the other, giving birth to a child in the craziest circumstances, describing dangerous encounters with buffalo and elephants out in the bush, car breakdowns that could

have cost me my life, without even mentioning the woman who pulled her dead baby from her own body in my car, something that nearly sent me insane. Just how much more excitement do these gentlemen publishers expect? That's what I end up asking myself as I put all the returned manuscripts away.

Actually I tell myself I'm pleased. Who knows what telling all that in public would bring upon us? I've got an interesting job and an intelligent, pretty daughter. Writing down the story of my life in Africa has been therapeutic and now I feel I'm changing and have got a new lease on life. Only the pains in my back remain as an almost daily reminder of the manuscripts now lying packed away in the basement.

* * *

By now, however, I'm starting to feel we're a bit cramped in our little flat and that at seven, Napirai could really do with a room of her own. If I get a chance I should start making an effort to get a bigger flat as long as I can afford it. Nowadays I scarcely even have time to attend the lone mothers' club and it comes as a surprise to me one day to find out that it's been dissolved. All that remains for me is the close contact I've build up with two of the women I met there.

I start to find my feet at work but it takes time to get to know all the products and what they're used for. The two other sales representatives are trained dental technicians and have been working in this sphere for more than ten years. I have to spend my evenings going through books and brochures and feel sometimes as if I'll never get my head around all the complicated names and processes.

* * *

My back pains won't go away though and one Friday I take it into my head to use a massage voucher I was given by my German friend, Andrea, three months earlier as a birthday present. While I'm lying there on the massage table the masseuse asks me if I'm the woman from Africa who's written a book. She wants to know when it's coming out. Obviously Andrea's been telling her all about me.

'Probably never,' I reply. 'So far not a single publisher has shown the slightest interest.'

'But it has to get published,' she says enthusiastically and asks my permission to get addresses of some more suitable publishers from a friend of hers who runs a bookshop. Somewhat reluctantly I nod OK

and a few days later I find a note pushed through my door with the addresses of four small publishers. I'm not at all certain I should even bother, as everything's going fine at the moment. But a few friends coax me into it and I eventually ring up one of them. The publisher tells me however that they only publish books by foreign authors. If my husband had written the book for example then they might at least in theory have been interested.

I then try a Munich publishing house called a1, which strikes me as a funny name. A man's voice comes on the line and he hears my story out quietly before asking me how I managed to come across them. We have a long chat and in the end he asks me to send in the manuscript so he can take a look at it. So I take a copy down to the post office, thinking to myself: This is the last time I spend so much money just on postage. He says it could take up to six months for them to get back to me.

* * *

My first few days out selling are nice and simple as they let me accompany one of the others. I listen to him carefully and begin to worry that it'll take years before I'm able to make a presentation as expertly. In January 1997 I'm sent off on a one-week training course in Germany. I'm supposed to learn all about ten out of some two hundred products, including the way in which they are supposed to be applied. It's a hard course but well taught. All the time these people are teaching me about what you can do and what you need to repair or replace bad teeth or even how to fix an entire set of teeth, I can't help smiling to myself and thinking of my family back in Africa. Protruding teeth or teeth that have large gaps between them, things we see as disfiguring and often spend large sums of money correcting, their tribe consider to be attractive. In any case, all Masai are missing their two lower middle incisors. Usually the children do it themselves when they are seven to nine years old, using a sharp knife or a needle which they push into the gum and then bang with a stone until the tooth falls out covered in blood. The children tend to be very proud of themselves afterwards and the adults shower praise on them. Why each and every member of the tribe went through this ritual was something I never found out, but it must have something to do with a fear of choking if they catch some illness or other. You'd be surprised what different attitudes people can have towards their teeth.

When I get back to Switzerland it's time for me to go out on the sales beat on my own. As usual I start out trying to make appointments over the phone but it simply doesn't work. Almost

everyone I call comes back with the same answer: 'We've got all the stuff we need but by all means send us some brochures. The boss never has time to see anyone anyway.' Or: 'I'm sorry we're not seeing any new sales reps; we've been using the same ones for years and we get on fine.'

There's only one thing for it, therefore: I've got to go out and knock on doors. But with this sort of customer it's not that easy to get to see the right person. It's nearly always busy at their practices and time and again I get asked: 'Have you got an appointment?' Sometimes I get the impression that these women sitting behind the counter see themselves as an impenetrable wall to protect their boss from me.

The best that happens is that occasionally someone will ask me if I'd like to have a cup of coffee and the boss will see me briefly in ten minutes or so. That cheers me up but has me worrying if I'll have the right answers to his questions when he finally sees me. I've never worked in an area where I felt quite so uncertain of myself. But every little order I achieve gives me that extra bit of self-confidence.

Late one afternoon when I return home I find a letter from lames waiting. I'm always pleased when I *see* from the envelope that I've got mail from Kenya. He'd written this one on 5 January 1997.

> Dear Corinne and Napirai,
>
> Best wishes and God bless both of you. I am praying that you survive and enjoy this new year of 1997. Here in Kenya we have no peace any more. People are fighting every day. Lots of the Turkana and Samburu have guns now. This is new for us. Between December 24 and January 3 there was a big battle between the tribes. It took place in Baragoi, Marti, Barsaloi, Opiroi and lots of other places. Many people were killed, eleven alone in Barsaloi, including two of my family, a girl and an old man, but not anybody from our corral. All our animals, the goats, cows and camels were stolen. We have nothing left. Everybody has fled now and we are living in Maralal. There is nobody left now in Barsaloi or the other villages of Baragoi and Opiroi. People are living like refugees, with nothing to eat. We don't even have enough room to live in Maralal. There are too few houses for us all. I think many people will probably die of poverty.
>
> There are no lessons any more as everybody has run away. Even the school in Maralal is empty. Maybe you heard on the radio or in the papers that bandits with a helicopter came and killed our district officer and two policemen. Between Christmas and New Year was a really bad time for

us. So we didn't celebrate. My family now lives in Maralal near the school. I hope you can still remember where that is. None of them has a house or any animals any more and have to beg food from other people.

Dear Corinne and Napirai, I hope you are well. Please use my bank account to help us get something to eat. If I get the chance to go to Barsaloi I'll send you photos of a ceremony that took place there last month. But the people there are still fighting. There's no peace anywhere in the Samburu district. Everybody's leaving.

I wish you and Napirai and your friends a happy New Year 1997. May God grant you peace and a good life.

Your James

All the family send their best wishes to you and Napirai

I feel a shiver run down my spine at the thought of how bad things had become for them. My beloved Mama had to flee to Maralal after having lived all her life in the one little village. She never wanted to come along in my car; she thought life in a town was terrible. She loved her Barsaloi and unless a particular ceremony obliged her to make a journey somewhere else, she spent all her time happily around her little *manyatta.* And now this had happened! They must have had to flee through the dangerous Loriki jungle, and with lots of little children in tow. Thinking about the fate of my Samburu family I realised that had things between me and Lketinga gone better, I too would now be destitute. If I had not given up before, I certainly would have now.

With such thoughts running through my mind I couldn't help feeling a huge sigh of relief that here I was living safe in Switzerland, yet at the same time I still felt forever bound up with these people. It was always those who had the least that suffered the most! I drive straight away round to the bank to send them some money so they can at least buy a few goats and something to eat. Then I pray for them and post a letter of commiseration.

* * *

At the beginning of March I'm off on another course, in Holland this time. I'm really impressed by the new range of products and find it easy to identify with them. I come back from Holland full of enthusiasm and can't wait to display my new knowledge. But because

I'm going to need a good few minutes of the dentists' attention now, I change my tactics to avoid being turned away at the reception desk. I go round all the dentists in a particular town trying to arrange appointments over the next few days. As we currently have attractive offers for new customers I succeed in about fifty per cent of the practices. My appointment diary is starting to fill up now and after six months in the job I feel I'm starting to be successful.

One of my neighbors tells me there's a flat in a new block in our village that's still available and up for viewing. Even though the rent seems too dear, I go and take a look. And once again it seems nothing can go wrong, inevitably the inevitable happens: it's absolutely the nicest flat I've seen for ages. It's spacious, open-plan and with big windows. I'm really taken with it even though I've had to find my way round with a torch as there's no electricity yet. All of a sudden the amount of the rent no longer seems important and I decide to take it. And happily I get a promise that this dream flat can be mine. We can move in on April 1. Even so it's hard saying goodbye to our old neighborhood. The girls are like members of a blood sisterhood, and I've enjoyed the company of my neighbors.

It's also not all that easy settling into the new flat. Up until now Napirai has always slept in my bed, whereas now she has a room of her own. Instead of going straight to sleep in the evening now she's calling out every five minutes, 'Mama, are you still there? I can't see or hear you Mama. I want to go back to our old flat.' But after a few weeks even these problems fade away and I start to take as much delight in our new flat as if it were a precious jewel. Sitting in front of an open fire in the evening I daydream and think of Africa. It's the smell of the fire that even still reawakens old memories. I imagine myself squatting on the earth in front of a campfire preparing a simple meal or making tea for Lketinga and his warrior friends.

I can still feel that sense of well-being I had in our *manyatta* which for all its primitiveness still provided protection from the heat, the cold and the wild animals. I realise that I have never had quite the same feeling of safety and security in any of my Swiss flats, no matter how luxurious they might be. On the other hand I have to admit that I'm able to enjoy a bit of luxury again now. When we first came back I wanted to live a life with just the bare minimum essentials. Now I've fitted out the flat with the best modern equipment; I hardly ever go into the second-hand shops any more and am gradually piling up all those things that people here think are absolutely necessary. I've got myself back to the standard of living I enjoyed before I went to Africa, and despite a few misgivings I have to admit I'm proud of it.

Napirai soon makes friends among the girls in our new neighborhood and little by little our old ties fade away. She feels at

home with her childminders and her grandmother's house is directly on her way to school. I'm really feeling fulfilled in my job. By now I'm going back to several dental practices and getting a friendlier and more relaxed reception.

In the continuing number of courses and further education classes we have to go to we're now even sitting in on certain dental operations. Not everyone finds it easy to stomach the sight of blood and drilling into bone, but having lived with the Samburu is to my advantage. After all, I've seen the men slaughter an animal and drink its blood to increase their own strength. After a hard school like that, the everyday sight of blood hardly troubles me.

* * *

One evening just as I'm doing my daily report for work the phone rings, and I recognize the voice of the publisher from Munich. Oh God, I had completely forgotten about that manuscript. So many things have changed over the past six months, what with the new job and new flat. The act of committing all my past experiences to paper seems itself a distant memory now. Now I hear the publisher say: 'Things are looking good for your gripping life story. But before we make a final decision we'd like to meet you in person.'

I'm rather taken aback. Nine months ago I'd probably have been jumping up and down but right now I'm not sure if I've got room in my new life for this. Nonetheless I accept his invitation to come and meet him. If I don't get on with the publishers I can always withdraw my manuscript.

A few weeks later I'm on the train to Munich, not at all sure that I'm doing the right thing. The publisher comes to meet me at the station and I find I get on with him straight away. A group of other people are waiting to meet me at the office, including a lively press lady who I immediately get on with really well.

On the train home after this encouraging meeting I begin to feel a little thrill of anticipation about what might come of it. A few days later I get a definite positive decision from them and details of a contract. There's no stopping me now. I ring up everyone who gave me moral support while I was writing, to get the news off my chest. They're all delighted but none of them really knows what happens next.

Christmas is getting close now and for the first time I can invite all the family to come round to our big flat. We have a really good, happy, quiet family Christmas, the harmony broken only by the arrival of a letter from Kenya.

Because of the continuing conflict the family still can't go back to the village. But thanks to the money we sent them they have at least been able to buy food and some goats which James has divided out between the family members. At last we also have photos of Napirai's half-sister. She's a pretty little girl too, but with her shaven head she doesn't look much like Napirai. But both girls definitely have the same eyes. There are also pictures of James at the ceremony marking him of marriageable age and for the first time I see him with the traditional face paint and wearing just a kanga. He looks strangely unfamiliar, as up until now I've only seen him in his school uniform or in his ‘normal’ clothes. These few photographs we receive remind me every time that my emotional contact to Kenya remains undiminished.

Publishing Sensation

I sign the contract for my book, *The White Masai*, on 1 February 1998, without realizing that I've just done something that within six months will have changed my life completely and will unleash a chain of events that will hit me like an avalanche.

Spring and summer pass quietly enough. I feel securely in the saddle at work now and sales are going well as I'm getting more and more regular customers. I love my work and make good money doing something I enjoy; in short I'm extremely satisfied with my way of life. I can't help making the comparison with how hard my life would be if I had stayed in Kenya.

In the middle of August I get a package from my publishers. My hands are already shaking as I start to open it as I know the only thing it can be is a copy of my finished book. And indeed, there it is in front of me. I'm speechless. It feels so wonderful to hold it in my hands that I simply can't let go of it. I'm absolutely thrilled. It's almost as if I've given birth to another child. It's simply overwhelming. I make an excited phone call to my boss, whom I'd told about the book just a few weeks ago, and gush over the phone to him. All my girlfriends are infected by my rush of euphoria and we end up having a spontaneous party at home that evening. Everyone comes by to admire the ‘great work’ and tell me it's bound to be a huge success.

When the last guests finally drift away around midnight I just sit there staring at *The White Masai* in awe. That very night I write a long letter to James telling him about the book I've written to tell people about his tribe, about my great Kenyan love and its sad ending. I realise it's not going to be easy for him to explain all this to his family and the people from the village.

* * *

Towards the end of August the first story about my life and the book appears in a women's magazine. I've had nothing to do with it; they simply took pictures out of the book. But that same day, just as I've visited my last dental practice out in Utzwil my mobile starts ringing in the car. When I access my voice mail I can just make out someone gushing on about ‘Bio chat show producer’, ‘great love’, and ‘TV appearance’, but there's a telephone number at the end. I ring up straight away and find myself talking to someone from the production team on Alfred Biolek's TV chat show.

The woman on the other end tells me she's just received a copy of

my book from the publishers and has read it at a single sitting. Next Tuesday, the topic on the chat show is to be ‘great loves’ and one of the people scheduled to appear has canceled, so she wants to know if I could leap in at the last moment and chat with Mr Biolek about my experiences. I couldn't get better publicity. I agree immediately. The producer tells me that she'll come to Zurich in two days time, on Sunday, to make sure I'm ‘TV-material’. She'll fix up all the rest with the press office. I put down the phone and shout for joy, if only to release my nervous tension. My fingers are shaking as I dial the number of my publisher to tell him the news. I also take the opportunity to suggest that the first edition of 10,000 might be too small a print run. He laughs and tells me: ‘Let's see how they go first. Remember you're an unknown author and we're just a little publishing house.’

Well, let's wait and see how it goes on Sunday. I spend Sunday with Andrea practicing speaking in a good German accent instead of my Swiss dialect so I sound good on TV too. At the same time she uses her hairdressing skills to give me a new hairdo. As it turns out, Sunday goes well and my appearance on the chat show is agreed.

There's a limousine waiting to meet me at Cologne airport to take me to a really posh hotel. Two hours later I'm sitting in make-up getting my hair seen to and my face powdered. Obviously I'm all excited but I keep telling myself: ‘Corinne, just pretend Herr Biolek is one of your dentist customers but instead of talking to him about fillings or moldings, you're telling him about your life in Kenya.’

On the set I'm seated next to the actor Helmut Berger, waiting for my turn and trying to follow the conversation between Sonja Ziemann and her husband Charles Regnier, another pair of famous actors. But I can hardly concentrate; I'm so busy trying to guess what I'm going to be asked and how I should give the best and most pithy answers. It seems as if the two of them are going on talking forever.

At last there's the applause to signal that their turn is over and I hear my name being announced. My legs turn to lead and my heart starts pounding as I walk over to my seat. I've made up my mind to pay really good attention to the question before I answer, which is not something I always do. Herr Biolek and I start chatting and before long I'm aware of some good-humored laughing in the audience and also some applause. A few minutes of this and I'm really starting to feel at ease, but by then my turn is almost over. The audience claps and as Berger passes by on his way to the hot seat, he gives me a little clap and says: ‘Fascinating, you've stolen the show from me!’ At that moment I realise that I've done well on my first TV appearance and feel hugely relieved. When we go to eat together later, everyone has questions for me. One of the first questions is whether the book is

going to come out in Italian. How on earth would I know?

When I get home my girlfriends all ring up to tell me how well I did. My boss even calls with a laugh to say he wonders how long I'll still be working for him. But I haven't the slightest interest in changing my job and keep on plugging away at my dentists.

One week after my TV appearance however the whole first edition print run has sold out. There are no more books to be had, but I'm coming down with requests for interviews. Everybody wants more photos of me and my daughter. To start with, Napirai isn't very keen about all this not least because she has nothing to say to anyone about Kenya or her father, as she was far too young to remember anything. But for the next few days our flat is swarming like a beehive.

In the morning I do my rounds of the dental practices and then in the afternoon I dash off to the hairdresser to be ready for the photographers. Every evening I clean the flat so everything will look nice when the next photographer or film crew turns up. Everything that's going on seems like a dream. I keep seeing my picture in German papers, sometimes on the front page, or next to famous people like Bill Clinton or some famous actor.

My long years working as a sales representative are paying off now because I don't worry about people touching me and I don't say anything too stupid. I'm asked to do several radio interviews and before long I'm doing my second TV appearance. Eventually the Swiss media home in on me too and stories appear in several newspapers and magazines with large circulations. But for nearly three weeks there isn't a single copy of *The White Masai* to be had in the bookshops, and loads of crazy people start ringing me up at home to try to find out where they can get hold of a copy. Then at last the second edition comes out with double the print run, and there's a third already in the works.

The official book launch is planned for September 16 in a wonderful garden center in Winterthur. I warn the bookseller to make sure there are lots of places because I'm sure loads of people are going to turn up. He laughs and says, ‘Look, this isn't my first book launch and you know it would be highly unusual if we filled more than a hundred seats for an unknown author and a relatively unknown publishing house.’ In the end however they're forced to go and fetch more and more chairs until the room's full to bursting point. I spot even my old schoolteacher amongst the audience.

The reading goes well. It only takes a couple of minutes for me to get into my element and not even notice my family sitting in the front row. It's up to me to organise the reading and so I pick out a few episodes and then talk a bit more about them afterwards. It's a tremendous experience and the atmosphere really gets to the audience

and I find the whole thing positively infectious. Afterwards I have to answer lots of questions from the listeners. Some of them want to know how my daughter and I are getting on today. What's Lketinga doing? Has he gone back to his tribe? Do you regret this whole affair? Questions and yet more questions. And then for the next hour I'm signing copies of the book.

My publisher has come down from Munich especially for this event, so some of those who've turned up are lucky and can get a book fresh off the presses. Again and again people ask me where and when I'm doing my next reading. Lots of them say they have friends and relatives who'd like to come to a reading. It seems we simply can't keep up with our own success. The next few days fly by. Although I spend all my time either at work or organizing other things to do with the book I almost never feel tired: everything's so new and interesting. Before long I'm asked to do a reading for the people in our local area, in a function room at a nearby restaurant. As I make my way there, I can hardly believe the number of cars parked outside. When I get to the door there are people in a long queue waiting to get in. I can't believe they all just want to hear my story, to feel a part of it!

They have to close the doors to the room when there are a hundred and fifty people inside, which annoys some of those who've made the journey especially. I go out and tell those still waiting that I'll do another reading in the same place in two weeks time. There's no more I can do at the moment. This time I'm a lot more nervous than I was at the book launch, as it's sort of a ‘home game’. But before long I realise that a lot of the people in the audience have come from elsewhere as I don't see too many familiar faces.

The evening goes the same way as the one in Winterthur. After the reading I take questions from the audience. Suddenly one elderly man in a dark-green pullover and braces asks me how we got on together sexually. He says it in such a salacious way, despite the fact that his wife is sitting there beside him, that I have to think to myself for a moment before answering.

‘Look here, I'm not going to describe any specific sexual act here, but you can read it all in the book.’

He fires back cheekily: ‘This is a reading, isn't it, not a sales evening.’

That starts a bit of a commotion in the room and a strikingly good-looking blond woman gets up and puts him down: ‘It's the sort of event you don't belong at with your dirty little mind.’

There's a burst of applause and I give her a beaming smile.

Later that evening somebody else tries to attack me from another angle: ‘Aren't you ashamed for your daughter's sake to publish all this intimate detail under your own name.’

But before I can answer the same lively blond woman is saying: ‘This woman has absolutely nothing to be ashamed of in this book and her daughter will be proud of her mother. I've read the book three times already and I recommend you do the same.’

I'm moved to be defended like this by someone I don't know. A little later when I'm signing copies, all of a sudden she's standing there before me with a beautiful big bunch of flowers. I'm more than astounded and say thanks and ask her if she'd like to come back for a nightcap with a little group of friends I've invited. She's delighted to accept.

After the room has cleared we all go back to my place. Andrea and her mother have made some tasty little snacks and we all get chatting, and I have time for a proper conversation with Irene, the woman from the audience. The last few leave after midnight and finally I can get to bed, tired but happy. It's back to visiting the dentists the next day. I keep getting recognized at the — practices I visit now because one or other of the assistants has seen me on TV or read one of the stories about me in the press. That's no disadvantage, I soon realise.

* * *

At long last there's another letter from Africa and I'm interested to know what they'll say about my book. James himself is pleased that I've written a book about my life with Lketinga and the Samburu. But for most of the others who've never been to school, it's hard to understand, particularly as most of them have never even held a book in their hands. James says if he had known I was writing a book he would have helped me with a lot more information about Samburu culture. He hopes that one day he'll be able to read it in English.

He goes on to tell me how hard it is for each and every one of them now just to get by and thanks me for the money I wired to his account. He can't teach in the school yet and is wondering about opening a shop with a few things to sell. However he lacks the start-up capital. He'd also like to come to Switzerland some time. He sends Napirai and me his best wishes, and says he'll always do what he can for me as we're related like brother and sister. Then he ends by wishing us a happy Christmas.

It's a positive letter in general even if it's not hard to see his scarcely veiled requests for more money. I've been making regular bank transfers since I came back and will continue to do so, but I don't want to turn the village into a hive of envy and greed.

* * *

By the end of November my book is top of all the bestseller lists in Switzerland and I'm invited back on to a TV chat show. The presenter is one of those whom people either love or hate. I'm going on in any case, because it's not exactly hard work. Our on-air conversation is pleasant enough with a few jokes thrown in. Afterwards there's a phone-in. Several women call to congratulate me on writing such an exciting book, but then there's a man whose name I can't make out but as soon as he starts speaking I recognize the voice. It's Markus, the former school friend whom I couldn't get out of my head for such a long time after we met at the school reunion. At first he congratulates me too, but then he goes on in an accusing tone of voice to ask me how I can justify the fact that my husband hasn't been able and won't be able to see his child for such a long time. It's hard on the father, he says, and accuses me of speaking too glibly about the fact. It's odd that it should be Markus calling in and being so argumentative. I don't remember him being anything like that serious. I explain the situation calmly to him from my point of view. After that the program conies to a close.

By now this whole business with the book is taking off at near light speed. While I'm out in the car en route to visit one of my customers I keep hearing myself on the radio giving an interview. Or I'm looking in a *What's On* magazine and see: Tonight, eight p.m., Corinne Hofmann is reading from her bestseller in Bern… or Basel… or Rüti… or wherever.' I still can hardly believe it and sometimes it seems as if I'm living in two different worlds at the same time. The first readers' letters have begun to arrive. Most of them are simply amazed at the story and have questions to ask. There are also a few male 'fans' who have gathered from my interviews that I'm single now. They send photos of themselves, sometimes with their house and fast car included. Strangely all these single men, from manual laborers to managing directors, seem to see me as their wife-to-be.

For my part I have not the slightest interest in starting up a relationship, not least because I simply don't have the time. One day in December while I'm sitting in the hairdresser's I pick up a Swiss magazine with an article headed 'Our Women of 1998'. It's a list of the women who over the past year have shocked, moved or entranced their readers most. To my astonishment in among the pictures of Cher, Princess Stephanie of Monaco and Hillary Clinton, there's a photo of me! It has a really strange effect on me, as if it's got nothing to do with me at all, a world in which I don't belong. That evening when I turn on the television I see a bookseller raving about the great sales of *The White Masai.* It's incredible. It all seems completely unreal, as if

they're talking about somebody else.

That December I'm due to give a reading in Munich at the Tollwood festival, a huge ‘alternative’ Christmas market. When I walk into the little tent set aside for readings, a woman in a cowboy hat, high heels and a thick down coat comes up to me with her arms open. Somehow or other her broad grin and long blond hair trailing out from under the hat seem familiar. And then when she gets right up to me, I think I must be dreaming: it's Rambo-Jutta, the woman I went right across Kenya with searching for Lketinga.

We throw our arms around each other. I can hardly believe it's really Jutta here in front of me. She heard about my reading by chance and decided just like that to turn up.

‘Aren't you living in Kenya any more?’ I ask her.

She tells me her mother died recently and she's just back in Germany for a couple of days to sort out her affairs.

‘You know, I just couldn't live here any more. I'm flying back to Kenya soon because I'm in charge of a new hospital out there and don't want to stay away too long.’

We swap addresses and I promise to take a look at the details of her new project and give some money towards it. She stays to the end of the reading and is enchanted by the book.

‘It's incredible that you remembered it all so well,’ she says at the end, ‘but that's exactly how I remember it too.’

We promise to keep in touch even though at the time I've no idea that she is going to do both my publisher and me a huge favor.

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My book is obviously the center of attention this Christmas. We're all curious to know where the adventure will lead. The publishers are already engaged in negotiations for translations into French and Italian. But I spend the two main days of the holiday paying all my attention to my daughter.

The beginning of 1999 however turns out to be even more hectic. The book is at the top of the German bestseller list now and the phone lines at the publishers are humming. Lots of bookshops want me to come and do a reading so the publicity people suggest setting up a tour round the country. That poses a difficult problem for me. On the one side I really like my job and it offers me financial security, on the other I can see this is a real opportunity to go out and sell my own ‘product’. How many people are lucky enough to be self-employed, paid to travel and be welcomed everywhere by listeners with open arms? I simply have to do it!

After just a slight hesitation I talk to my boss and ask him to let me go, even though I won't be able to work out my three months' notice. But I offer to put on a special evening for 'my' dentists with a reading, African food and African music. I really want to be able to reward those practices that treated me well by saying farewell in a special way. The evening goes so well that it makes leaving the job even more difficult, but at the beginning of February I bring my period of employment to a close. From now on I am just an author.

* * *

All of this has caused a lot of disruption to our lives and I need to get things back in order. Thank goodness Napirai can spend a few days at a time either with my mother or her childminder which at least for the first few months she enjoys. Meanwhile I'm on tour around Germany for a week at a time. I fly for the first bit, then take a taxi to the hotel they've reserved for me, ready to begin straight away with the first press interviews. The readings usually take place in the evening between seven p.m. and eight p.m. I have a quick bite to eat beforehand, as otherwise I get tired or feel ill during the reading, and then head off to wherever the event is taking place where there are usually people already waiting to share my story.

The event lasts up to two or three hours and afterwards I'm far too wound up to go to sleep, so instead I go and find a decent restaurant to get a proper meal and let the evening wind down. That's when my mind wanders to the extraordinary vagaries life can take. If anyone in Kenya had told me that I would be able to hold the attention of hundreds of people across Europe with the events of my life back there I'd have stared at them blankly and called them barking mad. At moments like that sitting in an almost empty restaurant in a strange city lost in my own thoughts, I feel an overwhelming sense of gratitude to Lketinga, his family and the Samburu.

Most of those who turn up to the readings are women, young and old, or couples. I'm struck by the fact that the audience differs enormously depending on where we are. In some places there's an atmosphere of enthusiastic attention right from the beginning, in others people need to thaw a little first. If there's any background noise in the auditorium then I know there are people in the audience who're going to lay into me verbally later. I understand that the book isn't for everyone and that I don't exactly have a doctorate in German literature. All I did was write down my experiences in the little spare time I had between coming home from work and looking after my daughter. It came straight from the heart and I'm only pleased that so

many people have found something positive in it.

When I'm signing copies afterwards women come up to the table with beaming eyes and take my hand and say: ‘Thank you so much Frau Hofmann for such a wonderful evening. It was just the most fascinating experience in my life.’

When people say something like that I just don't know how to react. It seems out of all proportion. Apart from anything else it gives me pause for thought and almost makes me sad that an event like this might be the best moment in the life of a woman of maybe sixty years of age. But I hear things like that all the time.

On one occasion I'm sitting signing books in a big store when a middle-aged woman comes up to me smiling and asks me to watch her walking up and down in front of the table I'm sitting at. She keeps saying: ‘Look, Frau Hofmann, do you see. I have you to thank for this!’ I haven't a clue what she's on about and am beginning to think she might be mad. Then she comes up to me and clutches my hands, stares into my eyes and says: ‘Up until recently I was in a wheelchair and couldn't walk. Then I read your book. Your strength of will impressed me enormously and I told myself if this woman can come back from the brink of death with malaria and get back on her feet again, then I can do it too! And now look, I'm walking again for the first time in years!’

And then she starts walking up and down in front of me again. I'm so touched that tears are welling up in my eyes and I can only say: ‘It would have been worth writing the book just for you!’

She places a huge bunch of flowers on the table next to me and says goodbye with a long, lingering look. I'm so knocked out by the experience that I can hardly pay attention to anybody else. For the first time I'm pleased I can simply get up and go. But it's an experience I call to mind whenever I read harsh criticism.

When I get back home on a Friday, I'm thrilled to see my little daughter again, who by now has turned ten. After being apart for so long she literally flings herself at me and is glad to be allowed to sleep in my bed again. I spend weekends reading letters from readers and try to answer as many of them as I can. There are more of them with every passing week. I'm surprised how much people tell me and what my book means to them.

Many of them want to say a personal thank you and say they found my description of my four years with Lketinga both honest and moving. Some of them recount their own good and bad experiences. Some women, and even a few men, who themselves have a romantic relationship with a partner belonging to another culture ask me for advice about what to do in a certain situation. All I can tell them is: ‘If you're not sure about your relationship deep down inside and need to

ask for advice, then it's clear something is already going wrong. No advice, no matter how well meant, would ever have stopped me from following my feelings.'

Of course I also get adversely critical or even downright hostile letters. But the most frequently-used sentence goes along the lines: 'I've read your book in a single sitting. I'm overwhelmed, fascinated and astounded by your strength.' Many of them say they feel they've actually lived through the events I describe. And nearly all of them ask after Napirai, Lketinga and how they and I are getting on.

As someone who never dreamed of writing to the author of a book I'm more than surprised by their reaction. I find it all a bit spooky really but I'm very moved by it.

* * *

A couple of weeks later I have a reading and signing to do in Switzerland. It's unusual because it's at a travel agent's and they're giving away sixty copies of the book. There's already a crowd spilling out on the pavement when I turn up. I start signing books straight away and soon there's a lively conversation with the customers going on. After half an hour the manager comes over to ask if I know the people on the other side of the road holding up a banner to demonstrate against me. I don't know what he's talking about because there are so many people standing around waiting that I can't see out the window. But when all the books have gone, I go out to take a look at the demonstrators.

I'm astounded to see four black women and two white men holding up a placard that says I insult African culture. I have no idea what they mean and try to talk to them. I try to shake hands but they aren't having that at all and instead start shouting, or rather screaming, at me in English. I try once again, quite calmly, to ask them what the problem is. Can't I read, they shout back at me. My book is full of lies. I ask them again what they're talking about and address myself to one of the two men. It seems though that he's just a placard carrier and says it's the African women shouting and beating their breasts I should talk to.

One of them then shouts at me that I'm insulting her people, that I depict the Samburu as stupid and uncivilized, that I don't know the difference between Samburu and Masai. All of this seems a bit suspect to me as I can tell straight away that these women belong neither to the Masai nor their Samburu relations. When I ask what tribe they belong to they shout back aggressively that they're Kenyans and what's in my book is not true. But what they're specifically annoyed

about they won't say.

I can only wonder what has driven them to make allegations like this. My life in Kenya was exactly as I described it and I certainly never had the impression I was insulting my husband's people. But when I realise there's no point trying to talk and that these woman are just trying to draw attention to themselves, I give up attempting to have a serious conversation. Even so, for the next few days I can't help thinking about the incident simply because I can't understand what it is these people want. My publisher has no idea either.

I suddenly remember the fortune teller to whom I should have given a book long ago anyhow. After all she was right about her prophecy of success. I ring her up and we arrange to meet the next day as I have to go off soon to do a second reading in Bern and then I'm back off to Germany. Before anything else, I want to ask her what the incident with the African women might mean. As before, I go into the tiny little house with all its dwarfs and once again the cat immediately settles in my lap. The fortune teller doesn't remember me however, and it's only when I hand over a copy of the book that she says: ‘Oh, it's you, is it? I read your story but didn't realise you'd been to see me.’

Then she shuffles the cards and I pick one out, just like I did last time. Once again she talks about the book's success and says it will keep on growing. But then she notices that there are going to be a few problems too. That's when I tell her about the Kenyan women. She lays out the cards again and says:

‘You'll have to look out for yourself. There are greedy envious people who'll just want to get money out of you and they won't give up easily. Be careful, be especially careful about your daughter.’

I feel quite ill at the thought of Napirai being drawn into anything.

‘It's not critical, but you'll have to be careful. Many people are envious of you and their number will grow.’

Her parting assurance that I shall soon get to know a wonderful man does nothing whatsoever to reassure me. I'm not interested in a man and I tell her brusquely:

‘Oh, drop it! I've no time for a relationship, least of all now when I'm traveling all the time and going on endlessly about my “old” love. A new love would hardly fit in very well. And when I get home I've got my daughter waiting for me.’

‘No, no, that's where you're wrong,’ she says excitedly.

‘My cards never lie. And anyway I don't mean “get to know”. You've known this man for ages. You could almost say he's standing outside your front door.’

That makes me laugh: ‘What? I don't know any man I could

suddenly fall in love with.'

It's not a subject I'm interested in. I'd far rather hear more about the demonstrators. But she waves the topic away and says:

'Just watch out, that's all, and it'll all be fine. You're doing the right thing.'

My time is up so I go home and talk it over with my mother, telling her to keep a close eye on Napirai.

Two days later I go off to Bern to do my second reading there. The bookshop is crowded out, and outside the door there are the same demonstrators. This time however, I decide not to get involved in some pointless conversation because I'd rather keep my strength for those people I want to give a little pleasure to. Despite everything it's a really enjoyable evening that goes on and on because lots of the listeners have questions and also want to discuss the demonstrators with me. It's late when I get back to the hotel and I'm looking forward to going home.

New Love

Napirai is with her grandmother the next night, as I've been invited out. My friend Hanni is cooking a Thai meal and has invited various people round. I'm back from Bern around midday and it seems ages until the evening. My child is out, I didn't sleep well and my thoughts keep coming back to the African women, irritated by not knowing what it is they really want. By three p.m. I can't stand sitting around the house any more and get into the car without knowing where I'm intending to go. I just have to get out of the house.

I'm beginning to realise I can't even go round to Hanni's today. Just thinking of sitting in a room again almost makes me claustrophobic. I ring her up and rather than going on about all sorts of things as I usually do, I tell her nothing more than the fact that I can't come. She's disappointed and asks why, but ridiculous as it sounds, I simply haven't got a reason for her. I hang up and drive aimlessly around. There are fat snowflakes falling, even though it's the beginning of March. I head for Rapperswil, more on autopilot than anything else, and then I remember Irene, the blond, lively woman I met at the reading. She and her husband and three children must live somewhere around here. She came to another reading and we swapped cards.

I pull in to the side of the road and have a look for her card. I don't know why exactly but I find it and ring her up. She's thrilled to hear from me and tells me how to get to her place. It's snowing really heavily when I arrive and instead of going inside for a cup of coffee I suggest we take a walk together. She's surprised but agrees. When she notices how wound up I am, she asks me what the matter is and I tell her about the African women. She thinks it's completely crazy too and says:

'What? You? Insult the Masai! They can't have read your book or certainly not understood it! I know it almost off by heart and there's not the slightest trace of an insult. It's impossible. You're only describing the things that happened to you.' She comes back to the topic angrily several times on our walk.

By now, however, it's got cold and the snow is blowing into our faces. We go back to her house and make a hot cup of tea. Then she invites me to stay for a *raclette* supper. But I'm not hungry and have to tell her with a laugh that that's the second invitation I've turned down in one day.

'No, no, I'll go and have a glass of wine somewhere and then take myself off home. I'm just not myself today.'

Irene says in a friendly way that she'll come with me, and given

that I don't know the area well, I ask her where she suggests we go. We set off in both cars. It's only seven p.m. but it's dark already and I can hardly make out the streets in the snowstorm. She leads me along a wiggly road through the forest and I begin doubting that I'm going to find anything out here to take my mind off things. Then suddenly we come upon an old farmhouse with a restaurant and bar. It's incredible. I'd never have found it on my own. We park outside and go in. At this time of night the bar is still empty but we sit down at one of the little tables and order drinks.

Irene is just telling me about something that happened recently when the door opens and a good-looking man walks in. In the low light all I notice at first are his shining eyes staring straight at me. I turn back to Irene to resume our conversation but a voice from behind me says:

'I don't believe it! The famous Corinne! What on earth are you doing in this little backwater?'

Before I can even turn round I recognize the voice: Markus, my former school chum. I look him in the eyes and notice that although his hair has a few touches of gray he's lost none of his radiant charm or good looks.

I start to introduce him to Irene but they've met lots of times before in this bar. We peck each other on both cheeks and he congratulates me on the success of the book. I tell him I'm surprised to find him in an out of the way bar like this, so early in the evening. He explains he's been ill in bed for the last three days but because it was really getting on top of him being stuck inside, he took it into his head to come out for a drink. I ask him why he was so confrontational when he called in to speak to me on the TV phone-in six months ago.

'Oh, forget it,' he says. 'It was more to do with me than you. And it's a long and not a pretty story, not one I want to get into tonight, now that I've bumped into you two.'

We chat about this and that and gradually the bar fills up until it gets so noisy we can hardly hear one another talk without putting our heads together. Listening to his good-natured, spontaneous conversation I feel strangely attracted to him. All of a sudden I'm glad I didn't go to Hanni's after all. Eventually I ask him what a married man is doing out on his own in a bar on a Saturday night. He looks serious for a few seconds and then lets his eyes fall to his glass of wine with a look of embarrassment:

'I'm not actually married any more. That's just the way things go.'

Then he asks me if we want another drink. Irene says no, she'd better get back to her family. On the other hand I'm enjoying his company and have no intention of going home just yet. On the contrary I'm dying to know why this 'Mr Perfect' is no longer married.

We decide to go somewhere not so noisy so we can talk more easily. I have to laugh when we stop and park outside another bar:

'It looks like you know all the boozers around here.'

'Well, that's just how it is when you're single. Although to be honest, I don't really go out all that much.'

We find stools at the bar and gradually start spilling out details of our life stories to one another. I listen carefully to him, interested to find that behind the happy-go-lucky sunny outer appearance there's another man, shy and sensitive. His story is incredibly sad, almost the exact opposite of what the other women told me when we met up at the school reunion. He tells it to me the way it was, without throwing any allegations about: how his life's ambitions at first gradually began to disintegrate, and then suddenly fell apart. He had a nervous breakdown in the end. The first indications had already been there at the school reunion four years ago but nobody noticed, we were all so in awe of him.

Now I understand why he was so belligerent on the phone-in. It was the time when he had just got divorced and had been prevented from seeing his own children for months. He clearly loves them very much, his eyes brimming with tears as he talks in gushing terms about his two daughters. We order a couple more drinks and every now and then I notice that his hand brushes my knee. By accident or on purpose? I'm not sure so I pretend not to notice. From time to time, however, I notice people giving us sideways looks, and then I realise they've recognized me. Someone comes over and asks: 'Excuse me, but is it possible I might have seen you recently on the television.' I look up in surprise but Markus isn't short of quick-witted answers.

Despite his sad story, we get on well together and time simply flies by. It's only when the bar starts to empty at around two a.m. that we think of parting company, although neither of us is in a mood for going home. But it's that time. We go out into the cold snowy night. To get to our cars we have to make our way down a steep little alley, which is not easy for me in my plimsolls. Laughing, I slither into Markus and grab his shoulders to try to stop myself. He turns around and catches me in his arms. My heart stands still as I feel his lips next to mine. We pull back and look at each other in surprise and embarrassment. And then I climb into the safety of my car. Feeling completely confused, I roll down the window to say goodbye. He gives me a laugh and bends down putting one hand on my shoulder and says:

'You're a terrific woman. Look after yourself and drive carefully.'

With that he turns round and gets into his own car. I drive off giving him one last wave. All the way home I'm an emotional mess. My heart is pounding but I don't know whether I want it to. When I

finally get to bed I can't get to sleep.

Next morning I nip round to fetch Napirai from my mother's, then we have breakfast together and she tells me everything she did with Granny and Hanspeter. All of a sudden the phone rings. It's eleven o'clock, and when I pick up the receiver it's Markus:

'Good morning, already up and about?'

I don't know what to say. I hadn't reckoned on him calling me today, but I can't help noticing how pleased I am. Napirai comes over and asks:

'Mama, who is it? Mamaaaaa, tell me who's on the phone? Why are you laughing in that funny voice?'

I indicate to her that I'll tell later and she goes off into her room to play. We're on the phone for two hours. I can hardly believe there's a man who can hold such a long and interesting conversation! I only put the phone down in the end when Napirai comes up and says:

'Mama, you're acting so funny! Tell me who it is that's on the telephone. Stop talking all this time.'

We say goodbye, although I let him know that I'm in Germany the coming week. Than I pick Napirai up and set her on my lap and tell her who Markus is and where I know him from and how we bumped into one another yesterday.

'Yes, but why did he call again just today then? Is he your boyfriend now?'

'No, I don't think so, or I mean, I don't know.'

'I don't want you to have a boyfriend, Mama!'

I reassure my ten-and-a-half-year-old:

'I don't have a boyfriend yet.'

That afternoon we go to Zurich zoo despite the biting cold. Then on the way home we spoil ourselves with chips and hot cups of tea. When we get back I stick Napirai in a warm bath. I've hardly sat down however when the phone rings. I can hardly believe it's Markus again, for the second time in one day. I tell him about our little excursion and he tells me he's been for a long walk on his own. He asks me if we'd like to go to the zoo with him and his children one day when they come to see him at the weekend. I don't have a problem with that as long as I can spare the time. We're on the phone for nearly an hour again before we eventually say goodbye. I haven't laughed as much in ages as I have with Markus.

The next day I fly to Düsseldorf. Before I leave the terminal, I spot some joke postcards on a news stand and on the spur of the moment scribble a few lines to Markus. I hesitate for a while before signing off with the line: 'Somehow I've still got butterflies in my tummy — how about you?' I pause for thought again before throwing it in the postbox: does that sound right? Am I just making a fool of myself? Oh

what the hell, now or never, and the card's gone!

Immediately I'm less tense and I grab a cab to the hotel. Heaven knows this Markus is turning my head. And then the fortune teller's words come back to me. She said I'd already known the man for years. I never even thought of Markus, even if I had found him attractive at the school reunion. He was married. All I was thinking of was wishing I could find someone similar. I get the butterflies again and start asking myself: 'Can it be fate?'

The reading that evening goes excellently and I feel on top of the world. Later, lying there in my hotel room, I really feel tempted to grab the phone and ring him up. But I don't want to overdo things and in any case I don't know how he feels about us. When we first started chatting, I got the idea that he didn't want to get involved with anyone else because having children only makes it complicated. It would take a lot of give and take on all sides, which is hard to imagine working, given that his children would always come first. That really came from the heart, but even still, how was it that we could talk for hours on end so easily and why was there such a spark between us? I can't wait to see if he gets in touch when I get back or if my crazy mixed-up postcard scares him off.

At long last I'm home again. My answering machine is full of messages but none of them are from Markus. Well, I tell myself, maybe the ones that hung up when the machine switched on were from him, but I can't help feeling disappointed. When I still haven't heard anything by Saturday evening, I decide to ring him. He sounds delighted to hear me, thanks me for the card with a laugh and says he would have called me the next day at the latest when he had taken his children back to their mother. Now I understand. He's had his children over. I'm hugely relieved.

The next week I invite Markus round for dinner. As I'm on the road all the time I really enjoy cooking at home from time to time. Napirai is staying over with the childminder for the evening as it seems far too early to introduce her to Markus. I've laid the table and made a prawn cocktail as a starter. Then I run round clearing things up in the flat and check my hair and make-up for at least the tenth time. Pretty but not too over-the-top. For God's sake, Corinne, you're acting like a teenager. The phone rings and I'm thinking to myself: something's come up, he can't make it. But no, he just can't find the street. I'm nervous as anything as I explain how to find the flat, and then before I know it, the doorbell's ringing.

I open the door and there's Markus running up the stairs from the external door with a bunch of roses and a huge smile on his face. We throw our arms around one another and have our first proper kiss, out there in the stairwell. We're both totally confused as I ask him in. He

glances at the table laid for dinner in the living room and compliments me on it, but then says:

'Are there prawns in that?'

'Yes, why?'

'It's just that they're the one thing I don't eat… sorry. But don't worry, I'm not that hungry, I'm just glad to be here. You won't get rid of me that easily tonight.' And he takes me in his arms.

* * *

By the time he leaves the flat the next morning, I know I'm in love. I never thought I would experience anything quite so overwhelming again and am convinced either fate or God has thrown us together.

I tell Napirai all about Markus over lunch and get a cavalcade of questions in return:

'What does he look like? Is he old or young? Does he like me too? Does he have children?'

When I say yes in answer to the last question she gets properly interested:

'How old are they and are they going to come round to play some time?'

Questions and more questions. From now on the only thing she wants to know is when she is going to meet Markus. We decide on the following weekend. I want to see what sort of impression he'll make on my little girl. When the weekend comes and the doorbell rings she rushes into her room and just peeks out through a crack in the door.

When I've welcomed Markus she comes out and looks at him for a bit, then asks where his children are. He tells her affably that they only live with him every other weekend and that's why they couldn't come with him this time. But he has got a little present for her. She takes it from him with curiosity, then pulls me by the hand into her room and says:

'But Mama, he looks young.'

I have to laugh because he's the same age as I am, and I don't know if she means I look a lot older or if it's because she's comparing him with the first relationship I had three years ago. Whatever the case, he's a hit with my Napirai, who's normally very cagey about men. With two daughters of his own he knows how to twist her round his little finger.

A bit later the boy next door drops in apparently just on the off chance, looking bored and with his baseball cap pulled down over his forehead. I introduce my new friend to him too and scarcely have the

children disappeared round the corner than I hear him say to Napirai: ‘Cool guy!’ We have to laugh: he's passed the first test.

We spend a pleasant evening together, Markus and Napirai gradually getting to know one another. When she goes to bed Markus actually tells her a bedtime story. I'm thrilled that apart from all his other good qualities he's also an attentive father figure. It's simply too good to be true.

* * *

Two days later I'm doing a book promotion in the Bernhard Theater in Gern. Just before I set off I get a fax from the promoter to tell me the Kenyan women are planning a big demonstration. I'm starting to get annoyed by the whole thing particularly as neither my publishers nor I have had any written complaints. There's simply no platform for a discussion. A security teams meets me in Zurich. Outside the theater there are about fifteen people with drums and other instruments on the pavement milking a lot of noise. Once again I try to talk to them. I go up to the spokeswoman and ask what the demonstration is about.

I get the same answer: that I'm casting a slur on the honor of Kenyans and I'll see what's coming to me; I'm earning lots of money and should give half of it to my Kenyan husband. The sums they mention make me laugh, despite the seriousness of the situation. They furthermore insist that my family back in Kenya is furious at me. That's when I pull James's most recent letter out of my pocket, having brought it along on purpose, and read it to them. In it he says that they all thank me for my support and help and are all happy that my book is selling well. The spokeswoman says it's all a lie and it's not a letter from James. By now I've had enough of wasting my time talking to some hysterical woman and walk off towards the security people. One of the women comes after me and shouts:

‘The child belongs to Kenya! We'll take her back there and claim half the money!’

Now I'm really furious and at the same time sad that these nutcases should get involved and out of greed, envy or whatever reason try to damage my relationship with my Kenyan family. The fact that they might put my child at risk is the most horrible threat of all.

This time too, people ask about the demonstration in the questions and answers session after the reading. It's become clear to me now that these are fanatics and we'll have to take them seriously. The next day I go to the police and report the demonstrators, whose names we now know as they had to register their demonstration, for

harassment. They had apparently hoped for up to a hundred and fifty people, but only a tenth of that number actually turned up. The police treat my complaint seriously and question those involved. They later tell me that it seems their complaints really are made-up and unfounded and the women have assured the police they will leave me alone from now on. As a result I withdraw my complaint against them. It would appear they had no idea how seriously we take threatening actions against other people here in Switzerland. And from then on they give me no further bother.

The whole business has a plus side too: letters from many other Kenyan women telling me they don't all think like that.

I shouldn't worry; they know there's nothing untrue in the book. Occasionally I even receive little presents from Africans with home-made cards and kindly words. Things like that relieve me as I've no idea whom I'm supposed to have insulted.

At the same time it occurs to me that it's been more than two months since I heard from James. And then, a few days later, a letter arrives. As always he starts by sending us his best wishes and telling us everything is OK. He apologies for not writing for so long but there were things he had to sort out. He had heard from Kenyans living in Switzerland that they didn't agree with the book because I hadn't treated the Samburu and Masai or their culture with respect. He had also been called in to the District Officer in Maralal to give an explanation. I shouldn't forget that according to Kenyan law I was still Lketinga's wife and Napirai his daughter. James had heard from the Kenyan women that his family was to get lots of money and so he asks me for more financial support. He also says he would like to read the book so he could make up his own mind who to believe. Then he goes on to tell me about plans for his forthcoming wedding and sends me photos of his bride-to-be, a young fifteen-year-old schoolgirl.

I find the letter irritating and thought-provoking. It would seem these women will stop at nothing. They've even spread their evil rumors back to Maralal. It makes me really sad: I lived with Lketinga's family and thought they would have known me better than that. Ever since I returned I've sent them what I could to support them, even before the book was a success and even so, James has doubts about who to believe. I need to do something but right now don't know what as I can't go to Kenya myself. The whole situation weighs heavily on my mind and I talk it over with my publisher. He decides to go to Maralal himself as soon as possible to meet my Kenyan relations. We realise it's important that someone should translate the book for Lketinga and James, and Jutta comes to mind, as she lives in Kenya, knows the area well and most importantly of all speaks the local language. The publisher gets in touch with her while I write to James

to tell him he'll come out to see them in two months time, in June 1999.

* * *

My new relationship on the other hand is going well. I meet Markus as often as possible. When I'm at home he comes and stays with us and goes straight from our house to his work in Zurich. Even though I had thought I had no time or space for a man in my life, all of a sudden the problem seems to have simply evaporated. Napirai is a real fan of Markus even if from time to time there's a note of jealousy, as when she says: 'She's *my* Mama. She belongs just to me!'

Meanwhile I've also got to know Markus's children. Although they were initially very shy, Napirai's constant urging of them to come and play eventually got them to relax and now the three of them play together as if they'd known one another for an eternity. My office has been turned into a spare bedroom and we look forward to having the pair of them come to stay again. Markus and I do lots of stuff together and although we've only been together two months it seems like years already. Obviously that's partly because we were at school together and still can spend ages chatting about the old days. If I have a reading in Zurich, we meet up afterwards in the center of town and go wandering through the little streets cuddling like teenagers. Who cares what other people think? After such a long period of celibacy there's nothing to be ashamed of. I couldn't care less what other people think: I'm thirty-nine years old and can look after myself.

That May I'm almost constantly on the road and have loads of interviews to do. The readings are almost always packed out and the book's reputation is growing. I spend a whole six days at Weiden Literary Festival. I can't help feeling excited to be up there with 'established' authors or seeing myself on posters or in brochures alongside serious literary figures. Many of them have published lots of books whereas I've only got one. I'm extremely nervous on the festival day when it's my turn to give a short reading. I'm sitting on the stage with four other authors, each of whom is to read a short passage from their book. I'm relieved to see from the public reaction that mine has gone down well.

Back home there's a new pile of letters waiting, and more at the publishers'. The first five hundred I replied to by hand, but there are more and more of them and I simply can't manage it any more, not least because almost every letter-writer has more questions.

A lot of schoolchildren are choosing my book as a topic for essays or as course reading material and ask me to give them more

information to help them. I try to answer at least their emails and letters just because at their age, I would never have had the courage to write to a 'celebrity'.

At the beginning of June, Markus and I have a joint birthday party as his is only two days after mine. We hold it on the day in between, and invite all our friends. It's a great party and lots of my girlfriends congratulate me on my good luck and say: 'Corinne, we've known you for nine years but never seen you as happy'. It's nearly dawn when the last guests leave.

For the next few weeks I'm tied up with work, which I still love, and have little free time but we make the most of it.

* * *

On July 10, my publisher flies to Nairobi with a friend. In his luggage, apart from lots of pictures of Napirai there's a cassette on which all of my family have recorded messages in English for James and especially Lketinga and Mama. They're going to be picked up in Nairobi by Jutta and her companion who've prepared everything over the past few weeks. She's already been to see my family in Maralal and has even taken the trouble to translate the entire book into Swahili for James and Lketinga so they can form their own opinion of it.

This little group takes the plane to Maralal as they don't have time to make the two-day journey by bus. My publisher and his companion meet James and Lketinga as agreed at the Samburu Lodge. James is immediately open and friendly but Lketinga initially regards these two strangers with suspicion and mistrust. It's only when he hears the greetings played on a cassette recorder they bought in Nairobi that he lightens up and becomes more friendly although obviously somewhat pensive. As he listens to the voices he keeps his head down looking at the pictures and the books. It's a moving moment for everyone there.

James and Lketinga are astounded by all the newspaper articles and more recent photos and have lots of questions. They discuss them, tell stories and chat for hours, and James and Lketinga say they're proud of the book and have no problems with it.

The next day they want to take the *'mzungus* to see Mama who's still living near Maralal. They travel in a pickup across uneven terrain up into the hills where she and some of the rest of the family are living. Mama gives the two white people a respectful but reserved welcome with an emotionless expression on her face, while her son James hands out all the presents they have brought — sugar, maize

flour, drinks and tobacco — in her *manyatta.* But when she drapes her new colorful wool blanket over her shoulders and they show her the pictures of Napirai, she finally starts to smile.

My publisher is extremely moved to see the very spartan conditions inside her tiny, windowless hut, filled with smoke from the fire. He also notices the severe poverty of the people living here because the continuing fighting means they can't return to Barsaloi and have very few animals. He sets up bank accounts for James and Lketinga in Maralal so they can receive money each month.

On the day they are due to leave, the two '*mzungus*' invite everyone to a meal in Maralal. Of course, only the men turn up, but even so there are fifteen of them around a long wooden table. The publisher, who happens to be a strict vegetarian, is astonished to see the huge mountain of meat served up and rapidly reduced to a few bones. After a last wander around the colorful town market surrounded by noisy hordes of curious children, the two visitors then say goodbye.

When my publisher and his companion return and tell me how moved they were by the people they met and show me all the photos they've taken, I have to fight back the tears. I can smell the land, the people and see every single detail in my mind's eye without them describing it. Obviously everyone there has grown older, as I have too, but the troubled times, hunger, the continuous fleeing from conflict, and perhaps also his experience with me, have all made Lketinga age faster. He has become an elegant, elderly '*Mzee*. But the scars from his car accident and his history of alcohol abuse have left their marks on his face. Looking at these pictures, I can see no sign of the 'demigod' I used to see him as.

* * *

That August I keep my promise to my friend Anneliese, and she and I fly off with Napirai for a sumptuous holiday in Jamaica. Just like in all the brochures, we have rooms right on the palm-fringed beach by the blue ocean. Even so this country doesn't do anything for me. It's almost certainly partly because I miss Markus whom I've only been living with for four months now. Automatically however I keep looking for something about this holiday destination that will move me in the same way Kenya did, and so far I haven't found it. Sometimes I ask myself if it would be the same now if I went back.

Nonetheless the journey has had one positive side effect. Already back home I had decided to give up smoking as Markus was a non-smoker. I decided therefore to pass the time on the long flight by

reading a book offering help on how to give up. I found that already after the first few pages I no longer felt the need for a cigarette, while Anneliese was dying for one. I know how awful it is when the only thing you can think of is a cigarette. We had scarcely landed when she lit up, only to have an armed policeman standing next to us say sternly: 'No smoking at the airport!' and she had to put it out again tetchy.

I find to my own surprise that the lack of a cigarette isn't bothering me at all. I'm not exactly sure what clicked in my head but the book certainly helped. During the holiday I actually pick up a cigarette a couple of times and light it but decide that after smoking for years, it's simply no longer for me. The rest of the holiday is enjoyable and relaxing but I'm still glad to be going home.

* * *

In the meantime my book is being translated into more and more languages. Over the next two years it's going to appear in France, Italy, Holland, all the Scandinavian countries, Israel, even in Japan. That's fifteen languages to date with more to follow. Who would have thought it! I'm not usually given to *Schadenfreude* but I'd like to see the faces of the publishers who glibly turned it down. The book is making it on to the bestseller lists in nearly every country where it's published and now I'm getting letters from all over the world. In a few cases I fly off to the launch in the relevant countries and give interviews to various newspapers and magazines and even appear on TV.

When I get back from one such tour in November, Napirai runs into my arms and complains: 'Mama, why do you keep having to go away? Everybody knows about it now. We've had our pictures taken so many times. I don't want you to have to keep going off because of that stupid book!'

Her voice is so sad and reproachful and it's not long before I'm ringing the publishers to say that despite the widespread interest in more readings during the coming year, I am temporarily, at least, giving them up. I want to enjoy this Christmas with Napirai and Markus together. He's also had to bear the side effects of all my charging around and it's already led to our first rows. It's really not been easy for him. Some days I get crazy fans ringing me up at all hours, even late at night, and they can be hard to get rid of politely. Or we're out eating in a restaurant and every half-hour someone or other comes up to talk about the book irrespective of whether we're in a deep personal conversation or have a forkful of food halfway to our mouths. It's just not easy for him, and I don't want to risk anything,

not my good relationship with Napirai nor my affection that is fast becoming love for Markus.

On the other hand it is my 'job' and that side is also part of ensuring its success. Of course I know that most readers mean well but even so with the book's sales just about at their peak, I decide to retreat from the limelight. I need the time anyhow to get myself together and decide what comes next because I know perfectly well that my days as an author are numbered. I'm determined not to write a sequel, even though lots of readers would like one, because I'd like a bit more peace and quiet in my life. But then at the beginning of March 2000 the paperback edition comes out and the whole fuss starts up anew as once again it climbs to the top of the bestseller lists. That means I have to do at least a few TV shows and public appearances.

Most of the time, however, I'm at home every night cooking for my family. I'm also beginning to regain my love of nature and enjoy going for long walks just on my own. All that I need with me is a little camera so I can capture and enjoy the plants, landscapes and stone formations I come across. And because I suddenly get the urge, I go out and buy a high-powered motor scooter and pass my test. Markus gets the same inspiration and before long we're roaring over the Swiss mountain passes together. Sometimes I take Napirai along on the pillion, but she's now at the age when she prefers getting in a huddle to gossip with her girlfriends. There's no doubt about: I'm beginning to feel things are changing but I have no idea where they'll lead.

* * *

I now get regular letters from Kenya and we exchange photos often. James is married now. Even though his wife went to the same school as he did, she had to undergo so-called female circumcision before their wedding. Reading that, I realise that their traditions are stronger than any education. That October I read in another letter that she has given birth to a healthy little girl.

However Lketinga's wife has had her second miscarriage and has to go into hospital because of complications. Lketinga is sad that they keep losing children. Only their firstborn girl has survived.

In one long letter from James there are a few words dictated by my mother-in-law:

> Napirai's Gogo[2] is very old now but she promises to pray for you and Napirai for the rest of her life. I will never forget what you have done for me, Corinne. You always looked after me, went and fetched wood for the fire, and

water, made my meals, washed my clothes and many many more things. I will always hold you dear in my heart.

Even ten years after I last saw her, such kind words move me deeply and I feel the ties that still bind us. I remember our first meeting in Barsaloi and can still picture Mama crawling into her *manyatta* to take a good sober look at me with Lketinga. It seemed like an eternity before she reached out her hand with a laugh and said, 'Jambo!' Even if I didn't understand a word of the torrent that followed, I could feel that she had given us her blessing and felt myself immediately liking her.

To think that today millions of people have read that story; I am only glad if I have given them something out of it.

* * *

In May 2001 I spend a couple of days in Munich to discuss the script for a possible film about my life. Discussions and negotiations about such a film have been going on for ages now. On the one hand things are tough in the film industry at present and on the other they have problems settling on a director and who should play the main roles of Lketinga and me.

I have to admit I find it difficult, even shocking, to read scenes in the script that don't come from the book or any part of my life in Kenya. It seems the dramatic narrative of a film is different from that of a book and from now on there is a lot of work and discussion before everyone involved can agree. I can only hope that if one day this chapter of my life does end up on the big screen that Napirai and I will be proud of it. After all, we're the ones who're going to have to live with it. But I'm cautiously optimistic that it'll work out and they'll produce a fine, authentic film. We can't wait to see it. Undoubtedly, it's going to be an odd experience to watch other people play out scenes from my life.

Plans for the Future

In the meantime our little family has grown closer. We've all now been to Bali on holiday together, a trip the girls still rave about. Sometimes we go camping for the weekend. It's all good fun and we always look forward to Markus's daughters coming to stay.

As the number of paperback copies of the book sold in Germany nears the one million mark, I start to think about what I'm going to do next. I've recently taken up again with Anna from the single mothers' group and often go out to visit her in her farmhouse. I love the way she lives. I always enjoy being out there with her and helping with the animals and can actually imagine myself living the same sort of hermit's existence.

Napirai and Markus, however, couldn't imagine living like that. The next thing that comes into my mind is that maybe I should open a hotel or restaurant. lust to keep all my options open, I've enrolled in all sorts of courses, learning about computers, book-keeping, how to make cheese or run a hotel or restaurant. Even so, I don't really know what sort of new project I want to take up, or when or even where. What inspires me most is the idea of running a small hotel, maybe in partnership with someone else. I already fantasies about calling it *The White Masai* and decorating it in an African style. I drive all round Switzerland looking for the right spot and when I find myself in the southern Italian speaking canton of Ticino, it occurs to me that I could well feel at home there.

A little bit later I spot a newspaper advertisement for an 'Intensive Italian language course in Ticino, starts one week from today'. Napirai has school holidays at the time so I sign both of us up. All we have to do is find a holiday apartment to let, which is hardly a problem down there in February.

I'm quite laid back about the idea of mother and daughter sharing a desk in school. Napirai is not quite so enamored. We spend the afternoons sightseeing and going on little trips around the area. The climate in Ticino is incredibly mild for the time of year, almost spring-like. After a week I'm so enchanted by the little town of Lugano with its lake, the mountains close by and whole panorama that looks just a little bit like Rio de Janeiro that I can's shake off the idea that this could be where we make our future.

Napirai likes it too although she wouldn't like moving away from her schoolfriends. On the other hand she would enjoy living in a town which has more to offer an adolescent girl than life in a village. We talk over the pros and cons and I'm convinced that at thirteen, Napirai could make the break. Her easygoing, relaxed attitude makes it easier

to make friends as we've noticed time and again on holiday. She's even making a good stab at the language already. But she is extremely sensitive and is very adversely affected by bad news or trouble. When we're strolling around town, she stops to drop a coin in the hat of every beggar or busker. She even feels sorry for restaurant owners with no customers and says things like: 'Look, Mama, there's nobody there. Shouldn't we go in and have a coffee? I'm really thirsty.' Even when she was a little girl she was quick to help other children if they fell over even if she didn't know them. She really can't bear to see animals suffering. Things like that leave scars that last years.

At one meter seventy-nine tall she also looks older than she is and sometimes people expect too much of her. I hope I wouldn't be asking too much of her to move home and only hope she'd find her feet here soon enough. Although Napirai is happy enough to be on her own she's a great communicator and prefers to have people she likes around her. She's creative, paints, writes letters and listens to music for hours on end. She has a good ear for music and sings wonderfully. On the other hand she's not really into sport. The only physical exercise she's really up for is dancing; she's got no lack of energy for that. All in all I'm proud of my adorable, sensitive, carefree girl.

We'll cope with the change and be happy here, I'm sure, because I feel deep in my heart that it's time for a change from our old home. The biggest problem is going to be the Italian language, particularly for Napirai in school. But other families manage a move abroad, sometimes with three or four children. Why shouldn't we? In any case Napirai has a phenomenal memory and is naturally good at languages. Later she'll be pleased to have an extra language.

Initially Markus isn't too thrilled by my plans: he's afraid he won't find a job in Ticino and for that reason says he doesn't want to go. After our first two weeks on the language course, I bring Napirai home to go back to school and then return to Ticino to finish the course. I find I'm managing to retain my basic Italian and all of a sudden I find it incredibly difficult to leave and go home. When I get back I'm unsettled and make up my mind: I absolutely have to move. There's some role waiting for me in southern Switzerland.

Markus is marvelous. In the meantime he's actually managed to find a job in Ticino and moved into a holiday let down there so he can start work straight away. Napirai can stay on in school until the summer holidays and then we can move into the new fiat we've at long last found. There was a lot of luck involved there too. I had scoured every newspaper in Ticino, searched the Internet and was driving the six-hour round trip twice a week, only to realise that all the flats I saw were either too small or in the wrong location.

I ended up finding our dream apartment by a chance glance

through a Zurich newspaper. I would never have thought of looking in this paper but with Markus down there on his own for two months already and having been let down once more on another flat because the owner wanted to let to a local family, I was scouring everything that came to hand. And there under the heading Ticino I found a single advert, inserted for one day only, as it turned out. It was the flat we wanted and was free to rent immediately.

Now that we knew our new address, I was eager to get Napirai registered for the local school at the end of the holidays. I used my meager Italian to arrange a time to go and see the school and get to know the teachers, because I think it's important for Napirai to get a glimpse of the area and her future classmates. Two days before the end of term we head down to Ticino feeling really just a little bit nervous. But the teachers are so friendly and kind that Napirai is immediately reassured. Now she can look forward to the new school year in a happy mind and with just a tinge of curiosity.

Back in German Switzerland I start organizing the move straight away. Markus can hardly help me now that he's already living in Ticino. When I realise how expensive a professional mover is going to be, I decide to do it all myself. I nip down to a car rental firm and look out the biggest van you can legally drive with an ordinary car license, and decide there and then that it will have to do. Whatever we can't fit in over the next couple of days we'll simply sell off or give away. We pack up only the most important stuff and that's already more than enough. We can't even find people to take some of the other things. All the furniture for Napirai's bedroom which we've had for more than five years finds no takers. We do a deal with a nearby charity clearance warehouse, a place that takes unwanted furniture, sells it off cheaply and hands over whatever cash comes in to local good causes. They agree to come the next day and take what-ever's left.

The big day comes ever closer and Markus and I still have no idea who's going to help us pack. I don't believe in hassling friends to help me move; the real friends will volunteer. And that's what happens: four days before we're due to move, Anneliese volunteers to lend a hand, and on the day itself Anna turns up with her grown-up daughter and her son who's a big strong lad now. Even my father, with whom I've had little contact since his divorce from my mother, turns up to help, which I find very touching. Two friends of Napirai turn out too so by the end of the evening before our long drive south, all our worldly chattels are safely packed up.

Everything we haven't been able to fit in or find a taker for will be picked up by the charity clearance people after we've gone. We spend our last night in the flat sleeping on blow-up mattresses. The

next morning Markus sets off in the van along with my father. I follow behind them with a packed car, while Napirai goes off for her last day in school here.

When we get to Ticino we unload everything into our new flat in an almost tropical temperature of thirty-five degrees Celsius. As we're sweating away carrying everything inside my mobile goes off. It's a man from the charity clearance people saying that they don't want the stuff we've left behind after all. When I ask why not, in an irritated voice, he coolly tells me that the child's bed won't sell without a mattress and that the wardrobe has a hardboard rather than proper wooden back to it. Their customers have higher standards! Oh yes, and another thing: there are two stickers on the bookcase. He has complaints about everything else too as if the only furniture he'd accept is stuff that's completely unused.

When I make some sarcastic comment, saying I wasn't exactly living in squalor, he tells me unapologetically that they'll take it away for me, but only if I pay. That makes me really mad and I tell them to get out of the flat and leave everything there. To this day I've never understood what the point of their so-called organization is.

Still in a bad temper about it all we start the long drive back to return the van. But before we can do that we have to dismantle all the furniture and everything else in Napirai's old room and load it up. She's disappointed to find that not even a charity warehouse would take away all the things from the room she loved so much. We pile it all into the van and drive over to a friend in Wetzikon who understands the situation we find ourselves in and has promised to take it all to the tip on Monday. It's ten p.m. before we've unloaded it all into the storage area next to his house.

Just as we're getting ready to drive off I spot a group of Africans in the garden next door who've been having a party and are watching us with curiosity. An idea hits me and I say to Markus: ‘Run on over to those people and tell them they can have any of this for nothing.’ When he does they nod enthusiastically.

Exhausted but proud at having managed everything, we take the van back and half an hour later drive by our friend's storage area again in our own car. We're delighted to see that everything we left there has found a new owner. The next day I tell Napirai that an African child somewhere is sleeping in her old bed and enjoying all her old furniture, and her eyes gleam.

* * *

Now three months after our first course in Italian, here we all are

living in Lugano. Napirai is getting used to it although she still misses some of her old friends. But three hours' train journey isn't exactly an impossible distance to cover. We're living in Switzerland after all, not Africa, and so far not one of us regrets the sudden move. Our flat is in an old villa and the owner has become a friend and a modern grandma-figure, a real ray of sunshine.

Since I've moved to Ticino I've felt more and more obliged to do what so many of my readers have asked and write a follow-up to my first book. Up until now I'd never have thought of it. But living here in these almost tropical temperatures with a wonderful view over the lake and all our interesting new acquaintances, I'm bound to find it easy. It will also be a way to answer all the questions I keep getting asked in letters. I start work straight away and find I'm really enjoying it, and so I put off my plans to start a hotel indefinitely.

Once more I'm astonished how a decision made in an instant can change your life and suddenly break an old routine and set you off on a different path. It's only a question of having the courage to make the change.

Off to Kilimanjaro

Over the next six months as I sit there writing, I get pangs of homesickness for Africa and wonder how I'd feel to be back on African soil. A brochure for treks arrived recently as it's something I've always thought of doing. While flicking through it I light on Kilimanjaro. On closer investigation I discover you can fly direct from Europe to Kilimanjaro, and all of a sudden I'm desperate to go back to Africa. To the roof of Africa!

I start to pore over the different ascents to the summit. I go to the computer, search for Kilimanjaro online and start perusing anything and everything that looks interesting. That evening I can't get to sleep. I keep wondering if I'm fit enough to get up to the top. I can't talk it over with Markus straight away as he's off in Morocco for ten days on a business trip and I don't want to start discussing such an off-the-wall idea over the phone. My mind keeps running over it all in bed so that the next morning I feel as if I've been hiking all night.

I'm certain of one thing: I'm going to have a go at it! I'd really love to go back to Africa and if I still can't go back to Kenya at least I can look down on it from above.

Napirai isn't exactly enamored of my plan: ‘Isn't it dangerous, Mama?’ she asks. ‘Do other women your age manage it?’

The cheek of her! I can hardly wait for Markus to come back now. The idea has so seized hold of me that I can hardly think of anything else and the next time he's on the phone I mention it to him. To my great surprise, he says he thinks it's a good idea and tells me to go ahead. I'm overjoyed.

The very next day I start trying to get myself fit. I no longer take a brief stroll into the mountains every couple of days: instead I'm now doing three to seven hours a day. On top of that I go swimming once a week and follow up with a sauna. Here in Ticino the weather is mild enough, even in December, to trek up as high as 1,700 meters without running into snow. There are steep tracks with little or no snow at all.

When Markus gets home he's astonished to find the house full of books about Kilimanjaro, that I've already booked an appointment with a doctor for my inoculations and that I'm on a daily fitness course, carrying the dumbbell he uses for weights training in my rucksack. He can see I'm serious about it all.

One day before Christmas when I'm out on my trek, I come across a little mountain restaurant at about the 1,500 meter level. As it's on a pass, there's a magnificent view all around as far as the Alps of the Valais canton. I'm the only customer so I get into a conversation with the landlord who tells me the business has only been going since the

previous summer. He tells me he's offering a five-course dinner on New Year's Eve with bed and breakfast for a limited group of twenty people. I reckon that would be a perfect start to the new year and don't think it would be hard to convince my nearest and dearest. On the way back down again I marvel at the gentle pink sunset spreading across the mountain ranges all around. It's as pretty as a fairy story and I'm cross with myself for not having brought my camera.

* * *

Two weeks later we spend New Year's Eve as I'd hoped up in the cosy little mountain restaurant with a few good friends including Madeleine and her partner. We're deep in the snow in bright sunshine but bitter cold. Napirai, however, preferred to spend New Year's Eve with her friends in her ‘old’ home. Up in the mountain restaurant though it's just like being at home with the landlord serving up one delicious dish after another. At midnight we fill our glasses with sparkling wine and toast one another before heading out on to the mountainside to look down at the valley spread beneath us and the stars above. It's a magic moment.

We wake up next morning after only a few hours sleep to find perfect mountain weather. A few of us decide to go on a mountain hike to the next restaurant, and it's late in the evening of New Year's Day 2003 before we get back to our house in the valley surrounded by palm trees. After a New Year's Eve like that, the year to follow can only be successful.

* * *

In the next few days I choose the tour company I want to use for Kilimanjaro and pick the route I want to take. I want the prettiest rather than the easiest route and go for the Machame ascent. On this route there are two acclimatisation stops built in and that seems important. There's also a two-day safari tacked on to the tour.

Every day that passes makes me more excited; I can't wait to see how I cope with this new adventure. Times just flies by. Especially as I'm out every day walking. I really enjoy it but at the same time I'm getting impatient and can't wait to be off. A week before my departure date I've already bought all the equipment. It has to be well thought out as we'll be passing through every type of climate from the savannah to arctic glacier conditions. A lot of my friends say they admire my courage which I find embarrassing as I have no idea how

I'm going to cope.

Four days before we're due to leave I get the final documents and a list of names of the other travelers. There are only six of us in the group, which strikes me as good. Looking through the list of names I try to imagine them and decide that three of them must be older, experienced mountaineers. There is also a young couple. I'm pleased there's at least one woman as otherwise I might have scared off all the men.

The day before my departure I'm all packed, but incredibly I haven't got an attack of nerves. Despite my eagerness to be off, however, I feel bad saying goodbye to Markus and Napirai, even though I know she'll be well looked after. Eventually I'm sitting in the train to Zurich where three hours later my friend Madeleine meets me. I'm spending the night at her place as my plane leaves at seven in the morning.

I only gradually begin to realise I'm on my way when the plane takes off for Amsterdam where I'm going to join up with my fellow adventurers. And one and a half hours later I'm queuing up at the check-in for the next leg of the journey to Kilimanjaro. It's amazing how many people are trying to get on to the flight. Most of them, however, are setting off on a safari. I look around to see if I can pick out my traveling companions, and within half an hour I reckon I've identified them all. But I make no effort to approach them as they don't seem interested in talking.

The picture I'd imagined of them all turns out, nine hours later when we land, to be pretty accurate. Our group consists of a pensioner who tells us he's been to the top twice already, another pensioner I'll call Franz and his thirty-four-year-old son Hans, as well as a young couple in their mid-twenties. My training in the sales business and my facility for getting to know people makes me think we couldn't be any more different. Oh well, one way or the other we'll have to get better acquainted as we climb the mountain together.

Even at nine p.m. in the evening we're hit by thirty-degree Celsius heat on landing at Kilimanjaro airport. It feels magnificent although I don't get the same feeling I had thirteen years earlier of ‘arriving home’. We drive to a nearby lodge where we're to spend the first night. I wake up at five a.m. with diarrhea which I immediately treat with a large dose of Imodium. We meet up at breakfast and cautiously get to know one another.

The first lot are talking about the highest mountain treks they've covered: the Breithorn, Grossglockner, Mont Blanc and all. Good grief, I've hiked as high as 3,000 meters and taken the train up the inside of the Jungfrau but that's as much as I have to compare. When I then hear that one of the two older men has just come back from a two-

week skiing expedition across glaciers to get fit for this expedition I start to have my first doubts. But first of all there's the safari to look forward to.

We drive for nearly five hours to get to the Tarangire National Park. On the journey I notice lots of herds of cows being looked after by Masai or their children. I wonder what Napirai would think and feel if she were here. I'm astonished to see warriors in traditional dress, with jewelery, war paint and spears, riding along on bicycles. That I find really weird. It all comes across as very different to before and somehow alien. I try to search deep inside myself to bring back memories I've forgotten, but I just can't. Instead I find myself missing Markus and my daughter.

When we reach the national park we're driven straight to our tent lodgings for lunch. While we're eating we get a fantastic view of a herd of elephants down by the river below. Now and then some of the animals trumpet loudly. In the afternoon we go out across the hot savannah looking for wildlife. We're in luck, and come across giraffes, gazelles, apes, zebras and buffalos. Seeing all these animals again starts to strike a chord in me that brings back my old fascination with Africa. By evening we've seen everything but lions. There's still tomorrow, however. We all retire to our tents to freshen up for dinner. The buffet is delicious and I tuck in heartily because who knows what we'll get up on the mountain.

Just before ten p.m. I leave the group as the conversation's going nowhere. There's no real atmosphere amongst the group yet. There's not much light on the way to my tent with just an oil lamp hanging outside each. When I get to the entrance I see some fifty beetles, locusts and insects of every size clinging to the illuminated wall of the tent. It doesn't exactly look very inviting. I try to work out how I'm going to get in there while keeping the insects out. First of all I turn the lamp out and shake the tent wall, then I use my torch to check, and slip as quickly as I can into the tent and lie down to go to sleep so that I don't notice any more of them.

By now the young couple have arrived back at their tent. I can see them through my little window and watch to see how they react to the insects. The two of them stand a good five minutes outside it wondering what to do. I have to keep myself from laughing. Finally the man takes a couple of steps back as the braver woman starts kicking at the tent wall to knock the creatures off. Eventually they get in and start checking out the tent in the light. Suddenly I hear two half stifled screams. Now I simply can't control myself any more and burst out laughing, but at the same time call out to ask them if everything's all right. They don't seem to find it very funny. I fall asleep listening to the chirping cicadas.

The next morning I'm woken early by something banging continuously against my tent. I crawl out in the gray light of dawn and see four dikdiks, dwarf antelopes, bounding around between the tents. They're so fast and elegant that it's fun to watch them. At the same time I hear the trumpeting of elephants getting closer. Gradually both human beings and animals waken to the new day and we're off again on our expedition. This time we come across vast numbers of elephants of all sizes. This morning there are whole tribes of apes and a couple of wild boar down by the river. We photograph everything.

Shortly after lunch it's time to make our way back to the first lodge. The driver asks us if we want to take a look at a Masai village. I'm thrilled, and can hardly imagine how it would feel to crawl into a *manyatta* again. I'd be curious to know just how I'd react. But my traveling companions are not in the slightest interested, saying they're here to see the animals not some humans. I don't want to be recognized and so I let the experience pass.

When we get to the lodge we sort out our kit, ready to begin the ascent next morning. Anything we won't need on the mountain we leave here. I'm amazed to see some of the men drinking beer. I've hardly drunk any alcohol since Christmas. There's a lot of talk about how it's every man for himself on the mountain. Whoever feels fit enough keeps going even if his partner is too tired. That obviously only applies to those in pairs, the young couple and the father and son. I chip in that I wouldn't leave my partner alone in a difficult situation, only to be rewarded with mocking looks and the line: ‘You obviously don't know the rules of the mountain.’ Each and every one of the party dreams of reaching the summit and all the others come second best. I suppose I'm no different myself.

The next morning we set off at eight o'clock. At first the bus trundles along a good metaled road heading towards Moshi and then takes a sharp left at a signpost reading Machame. The road suddenly starts to get bumpier and reminds me of the state of the roads in Kenya. We can see huge banana plantations on either side, along with coffee plants and some small allotments. Everything is green and luscious. We pass some simple little huts but also, set back from the road, one or two magnificent houses. The people here obviously do a lot better than those in other areas. Apart from anything else there are shops with freshly slaughtered meat hanging from hooks, even if it is swarming with the usual hordes of flies. It would appear the people also have the money to buy meat. When I point out some of these ‘butchers’ shops’ to my companions a couple of them are nearly sick.

It's still before noon when we get to the Machame Gate, 1,840 meters above sea level. We're not the only group about to set out on this route. There's complete chaos. All the groups have to register, hire

porters and pick up their packages of food. I'm looking forward to the start of the trek. Because I'd been out walking for several hours every day at home I've missed the exercise after sitting three days on our fat behinds. At last everything is sorted out. For our group of six we have twenty-four porters, a local guide and three assistant guides. It's madness to see the vast baggage train heading off here, with every porter carrying between twenty and twenty-five kilos of pack on his head.

We set off at a slow pace. It's hot but extraordinarily dry for such a magnificent rain forest. The path is dry red clay covered with stones and tree roots. It must be really difficult in wet weather. I'm enchanted with the abundant vegetation and soon start taking pictures. Every now and then I stop and ask my companion to take a picture of me. But after a bit I stop, as I can't shake off the impression that I'm annoying the rest of the group. I follow the leader happily but have to force myself to slow down to the average group speed which is not as fast as I'm used to in the Swiss Alps. My new water bottle with built-in drinking straw comes in really useful. It means I can drink while walking along and so make sure I'm keeping my fluid intake up.

We climb higher and higher, passing trees with creepers, giant ferns and tree trunks covered in moss. There is a smell of damp earth in the air. No sign of animals. I have no feeling of getting towards the 3,000 meter mark because at this height in Switzerland there are no trees or bushes any more. After a couple of hours it gets lighter as the jungle gradually gives way to low scrub and bushes. Eventually that too gives way to barren heath as we approach our camp after five hours trekking and covering a vertical height difference of 1,160 meters.

I'm surprised to have reached the camp already, but most of my fellow trekkers are exhausted and complain that our guide went far too quickly. Given that we've got another three assistant guides I'm surprised nobody discussed this beforehand. Hans agrees with me. Everybody crawls off into the tents that have already been set up for us next to the few bushes remaining at this height, and lies down to rest. I'm pleased to have a two-man tent to myself, particularly as my luggage fills a third of it. A little later an orange basin with just under a liter of warm water is left out in front of each tent for us to wash. As nobody from our group is being very sociable I start chatting to an American woman who's in a group of just three: herself, her porter and her guide. I never thought of the idea of tackling Kilimanjaro just like that.

It's fun to watch all the bustle around the camp. There are people cooking in some tents. There are a few people sitting on the ground

eating and drinking tea. Before long our group is called over to the mess tent. I find it weird that up here we've got a properly laid table with a blue and white striped tablecloth and folding chairs. We're served hot tea or coffee and salted popcorn, as a sort of aperitif. There's another hour to wait before we get the actual meal.

I'm still watching the comings and goings around the camp at six-thirty p.m. when suddenly the clouds lift and the summit of Kilimanjaro becomes visible for the first time. It seems incredibly close. The snow on top reaching down in long fingers towards the valley looks as if someone had emptied a bucket of white paint over the mountain. The vision is only fleeting, like the appearance of a ghost, and then once again the mountain is shrouded in cloud and the encroaching darkness. Our magnificent meal comes out, served on proper china. First of all there's a delicious soup, then the main course and fruit as desert. It feels like being back in colonial times.

The whole thing in fact feels just a little bit absurd to me. After all, I lived with Africans and now here are other Africans carrying tables and chairs around for me as a paying ‘white man’. I realise that many of them are glad to get a temporary job but it still takes some getting used to. By eight o'clock we're all in our tents but I can't sleep, with all the chatter or snoring coming from the other tents. My mind drifts back to our group and I hope we'll get a bit more sociability and camaraderie together tomorrow. Today hardly anyone exchanged a word.

By midnight I still can't get to sleep. Franz and Hans meanwhile are snoring away. I crawl out of my warm sleeping bag to go and empty my bladder. The night is cool and clear, the stars so near I could reach out and touch them and once again Kilimanjaro in its white robe towers above us. But I have to get back into the tent before the cold gets to me. I take a mild sleeping tablet in order to finally enjoy the sleep I have earned.

I'm woken around six a.m. by loud arguing between the father and son who've got damp sleeping bags because they didn't leave a ventilation panel open. It seems they've also nearly frozen and are feeling all stiff from the cold and the hard ground. I don't feel I can complain about anything like that: after all I'm used to sleeping on the ground and in any case I've bought myself a brand-new sleeping bag which is supposed to keep you warm even in extremely cold conditions and also I've got a protective underlay. After we all bid one another good morning I ask them where they got their sleeping bags. It turns out they've never heard of sleeping bag specifications with minimum comfort levels and maximum cold endurance levels and just got their sleeping bags from Aldi. They were very cheap according to Franz, who's a big Aldi fan.

Now however, he reads the small print and finds they're designed for comfort only down to five degrees Celsius and recommend a minimum temperature of minus ten. I can't help wondering how they think they're going to sleep at an altitude of 4,600 meters.

Heading for the toilet my legs suddenly feel like lead for no apparent reason. I'm horrified to find that despite having made provisions in advance my period has started. That's the last thing I need up here on the mountain. It comes as a real blow right now. I gulp down a couple of tablets to suppress the pains.

When I get back to my tent I find my ‘Good Morning Tea’ already laid out. The usual routine is for us to be woken by three people who run around shouting ‘Tea time! Coffee time!’ and we crawl out of our tent to find a tray with hot water, a tea bag and instant coffee. Right royal service! A little later the basins with warm water for washing are brought round and at seven-thirty a.m. we file into the mess tent for a ‘full breakfast’, with scrambled egg, sausages, toast, butter and marmalade, as well as fresh fruit, from mini bananas to pineapple. I doubt any of us have such a superb breakfast at home.

At around nine a.m. we set off for the Shira Plateau, on the high steppes, some 3,850 meters up. At first it's all very pleasant. Gradually the trees and bushes thin out. On the last trees we come across thin shreds of moss hanging like spiders’ webs, making it seem like some fantasy world out of Jurassic Park. Thin wisps of fog only add to the impression. There are also occasional clumps of purple thistles now and shrubs with red and white flowers. But unfortunately the path has started to head steeply uphill and with my leaden legs today it's really exhausting. The others seem fit and rested for a change. The slope is so steep here that I can't even use my walking sticks.

The reward, however, is a magnificent view of Mount Meru, and when I look back down behind us I can see the whole jungle we came through yesterday. But it's hard work pressing on uphill and I'm hugely relieved when we finally stop for lunch just after midday. It's foggy and cool as we sit down behind a rock out of the wind, once again at a properly laid table complete with tablecloth. I pull my hood up against the wind and we settle down to hot tea, bread and cheese and hot pancakes which renew my strength. It might be absurd to be sitting down in comfort like this up here, but I'll never forget it.

Afterwards I feel a little better as we set off again. We reach the Shira Plateau early in the afternoon. It's a huge camp and you can tell from the number of little toilet huts alone that at times it must get really busy. Gradually more and more groups arrive, including the American traveling on her own. Even though we're 3,850 meters up, there are still one or two bushes around so it still doesn't feel to me as if we're that high up. But today I'm really pleased to stop and rest and

can hardly wait for my little basin of water to wash. My legs still feel heavy and I've got stomach cramps too.

I try to use my mobile to ring home but there's no reception. I miss my little family and suddenly feel very selfish. Here I am climbing this mountain for God knows what reason while Markus is hard at work and having to look after Napirai at the same time. My morale is at rock bottom. Everyone in our little group seems so self-obsessed that the only time we speak to one another is over meals. I had imagined it would all be a lot jollier and more convivial. Looking out of my tent, however, I can see that some of the other groups are a lot more fun, but in the state I'm in, I can't bring myself to go over and try to talk to people. In any case most of the groups will be heading in different directions tomorrow.

By now the ice sheets of Kilimanjaro can be seen peeking out to tease us. Am I really going to make it all the way up there? Right now I'm not so sure. Eventually dinnertime comes around and there's a magnificent spread laid out again, but all I can manage is the soup. Our guide isn't impressed and tries to encourage me to eat more. I try to persuade him I'll be feeling better tomorrow.

I wake the next morning to our third day on the mountain. Even in my sleeping bag now it's starting to feel cool. I wonder how the father and son are coping. When I crawl out of my tent I find that the ground and even my tent ropes are frozen. As usual morning tea arrives, then water to wash and then we're served the full breakfast. Unfortunately once again I can't manage to eat much. Franz and Hans nearly froze during the night despite sleeping in all the clothes they could wear. They can't go on like this!

We're off almost immediately but Franz, the father, isn't in a good state especially as he's now got diarrhea. Our program for the day is the South Circuit, a detour to enable us to get acclimatised to the altitude. We're going to ascend 750 meters to the Lava Tower, 4,500 meters above sea level, and then come back down to 3,950 meters. Initially the route is so very gentle that it hardly feels as if we're going uphill at all. We can still see the peak of Kilimanjaro, but then suddenly the fog comes up behind us and it gets really cold. We had set out wearing just T-shirts but now we all pull our jackets on. The last little clumps of shrubbery are behind us now and the only vegetation is patches of lichen on the otherwise dark volcanic rock. We stop for lunch just before one o'clock. I'm glad of the rest as I can now really feel that we're 4,500 meters up.

There's also a cold wind blowing so we find a sheltered spot before sitting down to the table we now know so well. But suddenly a hailstorm hits us and the guides say we have to get a move on as the weather up here can change very quickly and already our visibility

has been limited by the fog. I'm feeling pretty exhausted but not bad for the altitude we're at. Franz is feeling worse and worse. Both he and his son have got bad headaches. The guide asks if we want to press on up to the Lava Tower or take the shorter route back down to our next camp. Franz opts for the shortcut and I'm wondering if I should go with him, when the young couple who seem full of energy announce that they're heading on up and I make up my mind to go with them.

As it turns out the weather gets better as we press on and before long the strange great mass of the Lava Tower is looming up in front of us. The guide congratulates us all on having reached 4,600 meters. I'm starting to feel better at last and almost euphoric although only too well aware that we're still aiming to reach the summit. We stop for a few photographs and then head downhill again. At this altitude it's three times faster going downhill. Before long we're once again walking among giant lobelia and senecia. These plants grow up to several meters in height almost like cacti among the rocks and seem weirdly out of place here. Sometimes in the distance they can look like an oasis of palm trees. The lower we get the more we see little silver-white plants dotted among the stones.

Jut before four p.m. we catch sight of our camp laid out beneath us. It's easy to tell the different groups apart by the color of the tents. There are two other groups besides us camped here at 3,950 meters, just below the southern Kilimanjaro glacier. It's really quite cold. In the kitchen tent it's all go already; they always have everything prepared by the time we reach our camp. We each have our own tent and our luggage is already inside. We meet up again with Franz who's not feeling any better. He's got a temperature and is wondering if he might have contracted malaria while we were on the safari, because he hadn't taken any prophylactic drugs. But his symptoms don't match my experiences with malaria, which is something of a relief. Our rapid descent has given Hans an even worse headache but he won't take anything for it.

Once again I turn on my mobile and discover to my delight that I've got a signal. Immediately I call my loved ones back home and am thrilled to hear Markus's voice again. When he asks, with concern in his voice, how I've been up to now, I burst into tears. My reaction to hearing his voice comes as a shock and I manage to assure him I'm physically fine but don't feel as if I'm fitting in. I'm not used to traveling in a group and thought it would all be different somehow. Also I'm not sure if I'm fit enough. Markus does his best to boost my spirits and it relieves me at least to hear that all's well with Napirai. I then have a chat with her myself and she says matter-of-factly: ‘Oh, Mama, don't worry about anything. You'll manage it all right and everything here is just fine.’ My heart just melts at the sound of her

voice, and I realise with a sudden intensity that these two people are the most important things in my life.

I feel really buoyed up by the phone call and can at long last laugh again. Even our guide notices that I seem a lot happier with myself. I'm not used to having long periods of feeling down and depressed, and I'm not really sure what caused it: the altitude, the period pills, the malaria pills or just the whole funny situation with the group. I still can't get my appetite back for dinner however, even though I'm amazed at what the chefs have conjured up for us: from a delicious tomato soup to pasta with fresh vegetables and a magnificent meat curry with rice.

The only thing I really feel like is raw carrots, and they conjure these up too, on a plate decorated with slices of orange. Over dinner Franz tells us that if he's not feeling better in the morning he's considering giving up. He's noticed his legs beginning to give up on him and this morning he stumbled over several stones. We'd all be sorry because he and his son have always been a source of some amusement.

After a brief visit to the toilets, the young couple declare they'll never get used to them. The pensioner spends more time writing in his diary than he does talking to anyone. I've managed to glean however that he's a retired dentist. I wonder if that's why he doesn't seem to like me: he can smell a former dental equipment sales representative.

One of our assistant guides mentions that there is a shortcut we could take that might increase our chances of getting to the summit. It would mean, however, that the day after tomorrow we would head for the Barafu Camp rather than the Kibo hut. It would be less tiring and we could spend the afternoon resting. The downside would be that we would miss out on Gilman's Point which is quite a climb. If we wanted to get our certificate and photograph on reaching the summit then we would have to take the direct route to Peak Uhuru.

Everyone agrees to this except me. I certainly want my photograph and certificate but I also think I'd manage Gilman's Point, though I'm not absolutely sure if I would then make it the rest of the way. We talk it back and forth and in the end decide that for the moment at least we'll stick to the route we've booked. Tomorrow night will be our last chance to change our minds. I need time to think it over. We all crawl into our tents and wait for longed-for sleep.

I'm up before six a.m. It's clear weather and the summit of Kilimanjaro seems near enough to touch. We're immediately below it. Once again it looks to me as if someone has poured milk or paint over it. It looks completely different to the snow and ice on our Swiss mountains. It must be because it's a volcano. I'm feeling strong and well-rested this morning and eager to trek on. It's another

acclimatisation day and we'll be going up and down a couple of small valleys. At breakfast Franz tells us that he's made up his mind and he and one of the assistant guides will turn around and head down. He's realised that he's not going to reach the summit and doesn't want to take any more risks. He'll go back to the lodge we started out from and might book himself on a safari to Ngongorongo Crater. That means his son Hans at least has the advantage of having two sleeping bags which will help him get through the nights more comfortably. Before we set off we have one last photograph taken of the whole group, particularly as one of the guides is now leaving with Franz.

We set off past the last of the strange senecia plants and before long we're heading up over rocks using both hands and feet at times as the sticks are more of a hindrance than a help. I find clambering up like this fun though as it's a bit of a change, and apart from anything else I'm too busy to worry about how I'm feeling. Once again the column of porters hurries on past us. I'm more amazed than ever at the skill with which they dart over this steep rocky landscape carrying such heavy burdens on their heads. Unlike us they can't use their hands to help them as they're using them to support their baskets, sacks or pans, and they're still twice as fast as us.

As we stop to let them pass I look to see what sort of equipment they have. Some of them are wearing shoes that are far too big for them, others without the laces done up. They're carrying rucksacks full of raw eggs in thin cardboard boxes and have to squeeze through gaps in the rocks that we can hardly fit through with just our little knapsacks. I don't dare imagine what happens to them if the eggs are broken when they arrive. It makes me realise that I ought to give the porters a good tip. As far as I'm concerned they're the real heroes of Kilimanjaro.

We take a long break at 4,250 meters up and then there's a short straight bit before we descend into a valley and then climb up the other side. Hans and I are really enjoying it and are eager to get on. The others, however, are a bit disappointed as they hadn't expected all these ups and downs. From time to time Hans and I chat together. He still can't understand why his father gave up. ‘After all, it was his idea,’ he says reproachfully, ‘his obsession to climb this mountain.

I had to come along, as his son, because he couldn't persuade anyone else. Now here I am dragging myself 6,000 meters up a mountain I never wanted to climb, while he's chilling out on a safari.’ His dry, sarcastic humor makes me laugh. He's been much more chatty with me since he's been on his own.

We reach Karanga camp after four and a half hours, just in time to dash into our tents to escape the first heavy burst of rain. The weather up here keeps changing all the time. One minute it's really

hot and the next a fog comes down and we're glad to have a pullover or jacket to put on. Kilimanjaro itself has vanished into the fog and rain for the moment. Our team of porters is huddled in the kitchen tent. Happily I've got a signal on my mobile again and send a text to Napirai and Markus who immediately reply, delighted and relieved to hear from me.

There's a long while before dinner so I start to read a book my mother gave me for the trip. Immediately I'm hooked: it's the story of a woman who travels through China, Nepal and India on a bicycle. She even cycles over mountain passes 5,000 meters up where her bicycle freezes up in the snow and ice. Looking at the pictures I gain confidence that our ambition is a lot easier to achieve. When I crawl out of my tent two hours later I'm pleased to see the sun is out again. All our team are lying relaxing in the evening sunshine. As a result we don't get our evening water to wash in.

I use a few refresher wipes and Petra lets me borrow her moisturizing spray. She's got a whole array of personal hygiene requisites. In comparison I've got black lines under my long fingernails which I can't do much about with the little water we have. With their partly broken fingernails my hands look like I've been using them to scrape out cooking pots, like I used to do in Barsaloi.

As the sun comes out, so Kilimanjaro emerges again from the clouds. Hans and I take the opportunity to get a few good photographs of each other against the impressive peak. Once again I have to ask myself who, if anyone of us, will make it to the top. Suddenly I feel I ought to agree to the change of route. I would hate it if one of our group didn't get to the peak just because of me. If we did that then it would be an absolute ‘must’ for me to get to Peak Uhuru. I tell the others over dinner that I agree with them and everyone is pleased to hear it. Later on I hear that the porters are happiest of all because it means they don't have to carry our luggage so far.

The next morning we rise to bright beautiful sunshine and it seems as if Kilimanjaro has grown closer overnight. It's hard to imagine that we're still 2,000 meters vertically below the peak. There are magnificent pancakes again for breakfast as well as toast and watermelon. I eat loads as I've really got my appetite back now, and apart from anything else we've an exhausting day and night ahead of us making our final attempt at the summit.

We've got to climb some 600 meters to reach Barafu camp. It starts out easily enough. Even the last traces of plant life have vanished by now and we're tramping over lava rocks of different shapes and sizes. Part of the track looks like piles of gray-black clay. It seems as if all traces of life have died out up here in this lunar landscape. Then just now and again I spot a small black spider

scurrying away from our advancing footsteps.

Up ahead we can see the porters hurrying up the last steep ascent to our next camp. I have dire forebodings. This final, extremely steep, climb is a real foretaste of the night to come. We have to keep stopping repeatedly, feeling as if we just can't go on. I'm just pleased to have my drinking straw which I suck on regularly to keep thirst at bay at least. After using up vast reserves of energy over three hours of trekking, we drag ourselves up the last of the 600 meters vertical difference into our camp, now at 4,540 meters above sea level. It's the stoniest, windiest and, above all else, dirtiest camp we have encountered. Our porters have put our tents up a bit too low and are now bounding past us to re-erect them in the new spot before we get there. I don't understand how these men can leap from rock to rock at this altitude carrying into the wind the igloo tent they've already built.

We stumble up to collapse and rest next to the tents. The people already in the camp are those who came down from the summit this morning. Sitting on a rock is one couple who look as if they are normally fit and active but today totally drained. I ask them how they got on and if they made it to the top. All they can do is nod and stammer: ‘Hard work!’ Then we come across one elderly man who has only just now, at half past midday, managed to make it back down. One look at him reminds me of an old saying we have back in Switzerland: ‘He's down to his gums!’ Absolutely on his last legs!

The chief attraction in this camp is the toilet — a little hut sitting over a bottomless pit. It looks rather rickety and unstable and doesn't exactly inspire confidence. Huge great mountain jackdaws circle over it never letting it out of their eyes. All this goes to explain why it's so dirty-looking up here. The two dormitories don't exactly fit in to this lunar landscape either. They look like two green tin cans. Even so, I can buy a can of Coca-Cola here and even reserve it for when I come back down from the peak, as if it were champagne.

After doing that, I bump into a woman creeping out of her tent and ask her how she found the experience of getting to the peak. She says she didn't make it and gave up on this ‘bloody mountain’ at 5,100 meters. She just couldn't see the point of torturing herself any further when she found her drinking water, which she had wrapped up well, had frozen solid. It's not exactly an encouraging story.

Hans is realizing once again that he hasn't come properly equipped. He doesn't have a thermos flask and realises now that even the hottest tea freezes in a few minutes. The pensioner who has already been to the top twice has decided to miss out on our night-time ascent this time and so at least Hans can use his insulating sleeve for his water bottle. The old man also lends him his altitude meter so we can know how far up we've come.

I gobble up the spaghetti we're served for lunch. I might have been totally exhausted when we arrived but after a few minutes in the sun I find I've recovered remarkably well. Over the meal we naturally chat about the ascent ahead of us. We're all a bit nervous, particularly as the tales we've heard from those coming back down haven't exactly been encouraging. We're due to set off at midnight, so that leaves hours to kill in this inhospitable place. A few of us decide to get some sleep during the afternoon. The pensioner decides to climb on a bit higher, while I go back to my gripping book.

The more I read, the calmer I become. Think about all the experiences I've already coped with, just like this woman in Nepal. Perhaps you become stronger in countries like this simply because that's the only way to have a ghost of a chance to achieve what you set out to do. As I read I become more and more certain that I will reach Peak Uhuru tonight, and that certainty calms my nerves.

The time drags however, and I find myself eagerly longing for dinner, which tonight will be served an hour earlier than normal, to allow us time to take a nap afterwards. It's quiet in the camp now as most people have headed on down the mountain. Apart from us there are two other small groups making tonight's ascent.

At long last it's time for the last lot of food to build our strength up. Hans says dryly: ‘It seems a bit like a last supper.’ In a few hours time we were to find out how close that joke was to becoming reality. We're served roast chicken legs and potato salad. Ravenously I scoff down everything that's brought out. Our guide gives us some final words of advice, telling us to put on all the warm clothing we have because it will be very cold up there. I can hardly imagine setting off on a trek wearing so many pullovers and jackets, quite apart from the layers of warm underwear, as I normally break out in a sweat easily. But I do as I'm told and am soon grateful.

Before setting off I sit in my tent and read some more. I've also been trying to work out how big a tip to give the porters afterwards. I'd also like to say a few words of thanks to them and want to make sure I think of something suitable. Just before nine p.m. I hear a wind getting up, but I'm feeling tired and gradually doze off.

At eleven-fifteen I'm woken up, pull on the rest of my clothing which I've been keeping warm inside my sleeping bag. I blow into my hiking boots for a few seconds to warm them up too. Then I pull on hat and gloves, fix my torch around my forehead and I'm all set. In my knapsack I've got my camera, two thermos flasks with hot drinks, some dried fruit and a couple of slices of wholemeal bread. For the moment at least I'm also carrying my waterproof trousers in there.

We all get together for a cup of tea to warm ourselves up before we set off into the unknown. The women are to go first, immediately

behind the guide. Before long, Petra's forehead torch starts to fail, and so I take the place immediately behind the guide. We walk really slowly at first as all we can see is the ground immediately beneath our feet and the route is very steep right from the outset. Although the wind is blowing strongly I have to take off a pullover and jacket after the first half-hour. I'm thirsty and miss my container with the straw. I couldn't bring it tonight because the contents would simply freeze. We plod on but it's hard going. Hans is getting headaches. Before long I have to stop to put back on the layers I'd taken off, because the wind has got stronger still.

It's starting to get cold quickly. After an hour or two — you begin to lose track of time — we're all wondering why on earth we're doing this. The wind is so strong I can hardly hear anything from the others in the group behind me, except for the occasional ‘Shit!’ There's another little group ahead of us, but if I look up I start to feel sick. As far as I can see there is nothing in front of us but the black slope of the mountain. There's no sign of the summit, just a path getting ever steeper in ever tighter curves. The wind is picking up even more and my fingers are starting to freeze. All around us now there are scraps of paper and broken glass. There's a woman coming towards us on her way back down. Her mountain clothing doesn't look to me as if it's good enough and the teddy bear on her knapsack seems a little out of place to say the least.

We stop to get our breath ever more frequently now. Every time we halt I have to sit down. The higher we get, the harder it becomes to breathe. Petra's in a bad way. She's had an attack of diarrhea. Once again I ask myself what I'm doing here. Nobody's in a good mood. Petra's tempted to turn back but the assistant guide encourages her to keep going. We forge on, step by step. Hans inspects his altitude meter only to give us all the depressing news that we're not at 5,000 meters yet.

It's still getting colder and windier. I close my eyes to narrow slits to stop them from weeping. The trouble with this is that I'm so tired, my eyes would rather close completely. But I drag myself onwards. Our guide keeps checking to make sure we're on course. All I can think about is how ill and exhausted I feel. The guide tells us: ‘don't think about the mountain. You have to get the mountain out of your heads. Think about home, in Germany, or wherever.’ I do as he says and imagine my daughter. Then all of a sudden I hear a strange voice calling her name, or rather crying it in lament. Again and again I hear like some loud lamentation: ‘Napirai! Naaaapirai!’ Then I realise that it's me, making this noise. My voice sounds strange, alien and far too deep. I have to stop and sit down immediately and take a drink of tea. It feels as if I'm dying of thirst.

Petra and her man say they can't go on. She's absolutely freezing and crouches there on the ground in agony. The wind is howling so fiercely we can hardly open our eyes. The guide advises her to pull on her waterproof trousers. But she won't move and insists she's going back down. Her partner and the two assistant guides pull her waterproof trousers on for her, and then they and she turn around and head back down.

Hans by now has been sick behind a rock. He was about to give up too but thanks to the tea the guide gave him, he has pulled through and is ready to go on. We're still only at 5,200 meters. That means we're only halfway and still have another 695 vertical meters to ascend. I'm not sure how I'm going to make it, but there's no way I'm going to give up now. The guide, Hans and I plough on. Hans is swaying. We're having to push ourselves every single meter of the way. By now I'm leaning on my poles, using my arms to physically drag myself upwards. I have to stop every twenty meters or so because I'm so exhausted I simply can't manage more than that at a time. But after pausing for a couple of minutes, I can then continue. That also helps me get my head back together. But when we start upwards again my energy evaporates after just a couple of steps. I also keep hearing myself call out in this strange voice. I can't help myself. The weaker I get, the louder I moan. At one point I call ‘Mama’, then again for Napirai or my darling Markus. I start trying to count my steps or bang my shoes together after each step. Anything to distract myself from the exhaustion and misery of the moment.

We must have been going for five hours steeply uphill by now and still there's nothing but blackness up ahead. I tell the guide I'm only going as far as Stella Point. How far is it anyhow, for God's sake? But he just gives us the same answer he's been using for hours on end: ‘Not far now.’ But I'm certain that I'm not going further than Stella Point. They can keep the summit. Hanging over my sticks, pulling myself upwards I try to think back to how bad things were all those years ago in the hospital in Maralal. Back then I was so weakened by malaria that I couldn't even walk to the toilet without help. Fifty meters seemed an impossible distance. And just stopping for a moment was no help at all because I felt just as bad afterwards. Here, however, just a couple of minutes break and I've got the strength to go on again, even if not much. Recalling the state I was in back then makes me feel a bit better. And then, back in Switzerland I'll never have to suffer like this again!

Hans is in a bad way too, swaying all over the place. We stop again for a bit. The guide's not exactly thrilled. He's freezing too. When we're about to set off again I notice he's nearly fallen asleep. I come to with a vengeance and shake him by the arm. He opens his

eyes, says, ‘Yes, yes,’ and sets off again. I begin to wonder if the two of us can manage with just one guide. What would we do if something happened to him or one of us lost it completely? I mustn't think like that. I ask him once again how far it is to Stella Point. ‘For me, six minutes,’ he says. ‘For you, I don't know.’ Well at least that means it can't be hours away.

I pull my last vestiges of strength together and think of the disappointed expression on my daughter's face when I tell her that her mother didn't make it to the top. Though, God knows, it's nothing to be ashamed of: this is sheer torture, for us at any rate. For the likes of Messner (the famous mountain climber) who picnic on peaks like this, it would no doubt be just a stroll. We rest again, pull ourselves together, and forge on. Hans looks at the altitude meter and says Stella Point's still a hundred meters above us. I can hardly believe it's so far. The guide takes our knapsacks and immediately we feel a bit better. We struggle onwards. Then suddenly the guide reaches out his hand and says, ‘Congratulations, you have reached Stella Point.’

I'm knocked out. Here we are at Stella Point which doesn't look anything special, and the altitude meter is out by a hundred meters. But then I turn round and see the sunrise. For the first time in more than six hours we can see more than dark rocks and blackness. This thin stripe of deep red is hugely moving, but it doesn't quite justify foraging under all my jackets to find my camera. It's even colder up here than it's been so far. Somehow or other I clamber into my waterproof over-trousers although none of it fits properly. What matters is keeping warm.

Hans keeps saying: ‘I feel so bad, it can't be good for you up here.’ I don't feel too bad though now: I don't feel sick and I haven't got a headache. But then I feel next to nothing at all. I'm completely drained and stripped of all emotion. Our guide is urging us on, and I hear Hans say: ‘Come on, let's keep going, we've got this far, we'll manage the rest.’ If he can be that optimistic in the state he's in, I simply have to go on. Later I will thank him. If it hadn't been for swaying old Hans, I would have seen no point in continuing.

It gradually starts to get brighter now and we can see that we're now trekking up along the rim of the volcanic crater to our right. I still have to lean on my sticks to pull myself along. To our left now the great wall of the glacier slowly starts to appear. I sit down and tell myself that this would make a great photo. When the guide sees me struggling to get my camera out of the bag, he helps me and even takes the first picture. It's just gone six a.m. and the sun is rising fast now as we fight our way upwards along the rim of the crater. Hans is wobbling from side to side more than ever and I'm starting to get really worried about him. Our guide is a good ten meters ahead of us.

We have to squeeze round a little rocky outcropping right on the edge of the crater. All of a sudden I'm wide awake as I see Hans sway and yell at him, but it's too late. He topples over backwards head first. I leap across and grab hold of him as his torso hangs over the edge of the crater. The guide comes rushing back too and gets him back on to his feet. From now until we reach the summit, he keeps a tight hold on him.

Great walls of ice now rise up against the gentle pink of the sky. At one point I hear myself sob. I'm actually sobbing to myself and don't recognize my own voice. I simply can't control my tears and don't even know why I'm crying. Is it exhaustion? Or the beauty of the view? Or just realizing that I'm up here on the roof of Africa? I simply don't know. I hear the guide say: 'Stop crying. You're wasting energy.' But I can't halt my loud, deep sobbing until we actually reach Uhuru Peak. It's seven a.m. as our guide congratulates us on reaching the summit. He's exhausted too even though he's been here a hundred times.

Apart from us, there are another six people on the top of the mountain. I sit down next to the sign marking the summit and take my waterproof over-trousers off so we can take a decent photograph. The guide advises us to hurry up: we ought to begin the descent as soon as possible given how ill Hans is feeling. He takes a few photos of us with half-frozen fingers. I automatically take a few pictures of the panorama and wait for a huge surge of emotion to overwhelm me, but it doesn't happen. It doesn't even occur to me to fulfill my original intention to look over the border into my dearly loved Kenya. I just feel empty, a husk, a zombie.

Hans feels the same and is white as a sheet. He's sorry to be here instead of his father. He never thought he'd reach the summit, being a smoker. It's time to go. As we edge along the crater we pass the next group of zombies. They too say nothing but just plod on towards the summit. We find ourselves running and sliding down a steep slope of volcanic ash. It's like jumping down a mountainside covered in deep snow, except that it's dust.

Hans has bad headaches and keeps tripping over his own feet. I'm worried whether he'll ever make it as far as the camp which is 1,200 meters vertically beneath us. My training pays off here although I'm incredibly thirsty. Even though it's really warm by now Hans won't take off his gloves, hat or jacket. He worries me more and more because his speech is getting confused. I keep hearing him say: 'It can't be good for you, feeling as bad as this.' We stop for a rest and a drink. I give him a painkiller for his headaches and a couple of aspirin to thin his blood.

We all tuck into my dried fruit, and after a couple of minutes he's

starting to feel better. But even though he's sweating he refuses to take anything off. The guide puts his arm around him to support him and the two of them set off together downhill at a run. It takes two hours of sliding and running downhill before we see the camp below us. I recognize the others from our group looking up at us and wave to them. Nobody waves back. Finally we make it back to the camp, nine hours after we left.

The mood is less than euphoric. The native assistant guides are the first to come up and congratulate us. Then Petra's boyfriend comes up and congratulates us too, but with not much enthusiasm. However she shouts out her congratulations from their tent. The retired dentist is even more dour, saying ‘Congratulations’, but not another word. Even so he takes a photo of me when I ask him to. Hans crawls into his tent and immediately falls asleep from exhaustion. There's not much time to pack up our things and get a bite of lunch as we have to descend 1,800 meters down the Mweka route to get to that camp.

I find myself sitting in my tent waiting for lunch. I've nobody to share my experience with because nobody else is interested. At least I can send a text message to my nearest and dearest, even if I haven't got enough battery power left to actually make a call. Napirai comes straight back with: ‘Super Mama, I always knew you'd do it!’ Markus is equally proud of my achievement and says he'll tell the rest of the family.

Our descent takes us back through all the different climatic zones in reverse order. Delving back into the increasingly thick jungle I'm delighted to see all the exotic plants in bloom, but the downhill trek is hard on the legs and knees in particular. After two hours of it I'm no longer paying attention to the pretty blossoms on the bushes or the broad valleys spread out beneath us. All I'm aware of is the blisters starting to form at various places on my feet. I put sticking plasters over the worst but it only increases my desire to reach the camp as quickly as possible. As we descend the humidity increases and everything is sticking to my body. Eventually after three hours we reach the camp and just manage to scramble into our tents before the heavens open. It pours down in stair rods for fifteen minutes and afterwards everything is sodden and even the interior of the tent feels damp. I couldn't care less as long as I don't have to do any more walking, after twelve hours on the trot! It's late afternoon now and we have time to kill before dinner. I long for the orange basin full of hot water like I've never longed for anything in my life. I also need to do something about my feet as we have another long trek downhill tomorrow.

I'm starting to look forward to getting home now. There's a general end-of-trip party atmosphere around the camp. For the guides

and porters it's the last tour before the summer as the monsoon season is about to start. They're also worried about America's impending invasion of Iraq because it'll put tourists off traveling. None of them knows when they'll earn more money, but even so they're all good-humored and concerned about our well-being. I lie there in my tent listening to the voices of the natives. They've always got something to talk about. All day long they laugh and chat and still manage to get their hard work done. They're far advanced on us white people when it comes to being carefree and communicating with one another. The members of our group are all sitting on their own in their tents with nothing to say to their fellow travelers, even after spending eleven days together.

Over dinner we discuss the amount of a tip to give. I reckon that in addition to the normal cost I'll add another hundred dollars for the porters. I would actually like to give more but when I hear the others' suggestions I don't want to appear too extravagant. Later I only wish I had been when my last two hundred and fifty dollars goes missing back at the lodge.

I sleep so deeply that night that I don't hear a peep from the little party the porters have to mark the end of the season. Even on our last day we're woken with our usual morning tea. After breakfast however, the camp is dismantled faster than usual. Virtually the whole team has gathered now as we're to say our farewells up here. Petra makes a little speech and hands over the tip to the main guide. Then I take my hundred dollars and say I want to donate them exclusively to the porters, the real heroes of Kilimanjaro. Their faces brighten immediately and they throw their hands in the hair, embarrassed and delighted all at once. I hear them call out *'Asante Mzungu.* Then they burst into a song about Kilimanjaro and I'm more moved by it than by anything else on the whole tour. Finally each one of the porters thanks us individually, shakes our hands and then piles all the luggage onto their heads before dashing on in front of us downhill.

After another three hours we get to the Machame Gate again to wait for our transport to the lodge. The porters are all busy washing and cleaning, some of them cleaning the tents and pots we used, others just washing themselves. After seven days we're also longing to get to the showers back at the hotel.

The guide hands Hans and me a certificate each and tells us that that night was so cold — minus twenty-five degrees Celsius at Stella Point — that only one fifth of the normal number of people making the final attempt actually reached the summit. That makes us feel a little bit proud after all.

Longing for Africa

Sitting on the plane the next day, tired and drained, I finally have time enough to reflect on my adventure. I'm rather disappointed to realise that this trip has not quelled my recurrent nostalgia for Africa. Maybe it's because Tanzania isn't Kenya, but maybe it's because so much has changed that 'my' Kenya no longer exists.

I've realised that as a tourist on this continent I'm always going to be torn two ways. I can't simply enjoy it as a white person just visiting, because I see too many things from the point of view of a native. And from their point of view I can see some of what we do there must seem incomprehensible. Lketinga and his family would never have understood the fact for example that we Europeans almost kill ourselves trying to climb a mountain and then pay for the torture of doing so. He would just have laughed and said: 'Corinne, why do you do it? It doesn't bring in food or water, it just causes you grief. It's crazy!'

And in some ways he'd be right. People who need to use all their energy and strength just to survive would never dream of expending effort to no purpose. So I now look on my Kilimanjaro trip from two points of view: on the one hand it seems absurd and crazy, but on the other I'm proud and happy that I didn't give up and reached the summit, the roof of Africa.

But this journey also proved to me that I couldn't live in Africa any more. My place is back home with my daughter and my current partner. When Markus throws his arms around me at Zurich airport and we drive back to Lugano, then I realise that this is where I feel at home.

* * *

Often people ask me if I ever regret having fallen in love with a Samburu warrior. It is a question I can answer without the slightest doubt: Never! I had the privilege to become part of a culture that in all probability will not exist for very much longer, and at the same time to know what a great love can be like. If there is any chance that we really have lived several lives then I am certain that at one stage I was born into a Samburu tribe. That's the only explanation I can imagine for the feeling I had back then that I had arrived home and that despite all the problems, I felt so safe and protected among Lketinga and his family.

I know for sure that if I hadn't listened to this inner voice I would

have felt my whole life long that I was missing something important and decisive. And I also would never have had my darling daughter Napirai whom I love more than anything.

But even if I was a Samburu in some other existence, I know that in this current life I was born and brought up in Switzerland and imbued with our central European culture. That is the real reason why the love Lketinga and I felt for one another couldn't last. We were simply too different.

Apart from anything we had no means of carrying out a deep meaningful verbal conversation. In my current relationship I realise how important and good it is to be able to use words to share thoughts and feelings. And I can no longer imagine giving up the comforts we take for granted in our lives today, even if it was my African experiences that made me enjoy them all the more.

No, I couldn't go back to live in Africa. But what remains is my bond with my former family and a huge curiosity about Kenya today. Maybe one day I will satisfy my curiosity, when Napirai is grown up and wants to meet her African relatives. Who knows?

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notes

Примечания

1

White person

2

Grandma